Pride Before Defeat

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Alma Evelene Myers
May 1985
Accepted by the faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English Degree.

Master's Committee: Rose O'Hickey, Chairman

May 31, 1985

[Signatures]

Date
Pride Before Defeat
Alma Evelene Myers, M.A.
Morehead State University, 1985

Director of Thesis: [Signature]

Pride Before Defeat is a creative thesis. It is a novel of modern romantic fiction. The central theme throughout the work is that of a young woman's struggle to find her place in life. Being written in the contemporary form, the theme and characters are very easily related to everyday people and problems. Since the work is crafted in the popular genre of the "formula romance", the scenes and conflicts are comprehendable by readers young and old.

We find a young heroine who is left alone in the world to face major decisions that will in some way influence her future, one being an important move from New York to Colorado. We also see the heroine's emotional involvements and various relationships with both men and women, which cause rising conflicts from a battle for power, authority, friendship, and love.

The characters are typical to the novel's western setting of Colorado. They range from the hard working ranchhands, good friends, the loving and motherly housekeeper, the wealthy and arrogant cattle breeder, to the sophisticated fortune hunting female.

As the theme matures, we learn that the characters as well as the setting are the underlying factors that contribute to the heroine's
personal growth and maturity. It is during this period of personal growth and finding eternal love that she learns the true meaning of Pride Before Defeat.

Accepted by: ____________________________, Chairman

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For
my loving husband, Edward
And
my dearest Mother, Lillie
Before you are truly defeated, you must be stripped of your pride, but pride is something that no man can take from you. Therefore, proclaim: Pride Before Defeat.
Acknowledgements: My sincere thanks and appreciation to Dr. Rose Orlich, Dr. Marc Glasser, and Dr. G. Ronald Dobler for reading and editing and for having confidence, patience, and consideration. For personal love and encouragement I thank Edward Myers, Lillie Tyree, and Virginia Prater.
Chapter One

Amy O'Rally sighed deeply as she placed the cover on her electric typewriter. A glance at the office clock reminded her she was to meet with her boss, Mr. Harry Cromwell, in exactly thirty minutes. Smoothing her tailored suit over her slim figure, she rose from her desk and began to pace about the large windowed outer office. Even though Amy looked much younger than her twenty-four years, whenever she wrinkled her brow to think seriously about a matter, as she was doing now, she looked much older.

"Great, it's raining," she mumbled darkly as she stood, arms folded tightly, staring out the modern fifty-story structure onto the afternoon Brooklyn traffic with unseeing eyes. Though the rain-streaked windows blurred whatever vision the street had to offer, her mind yielded to its own vision. Then, she began to recall vividly the painful events of the last twelve months.

They had been especially unnerving, seeming to tear away whatever identity she had ever had. The death of her parents had practically destroyed her zest for life. She had thought she would never smile again after their tragic death. What her father had so romantically intended to be a surprise second honeymoon and a Canadian ski trip for her mother, ended in a sudden tragedy. At least there had been no pain. The avalanche had smothered her parents' secluded cabin in a manner of seconds. For some time, Amy had refused to accept fully
the fact that her parents were gone. As her mind sank deeper into a world of emotional distress, the shrill ring of the office telephone scrambled her thoughts.

"Cromwell Enterprises, Miss O'Rally speaking." Amy hoped the probable client didn't notice her breathless tone. She suffered quietly through a brief pause before the calling party responded.

"Is that you, Rusty?" Amy knew the youthful voice at once. And momentarily, she relaxed.

"Oh, hi, Trace, what's up? You're still not going to try to change my mind, are you?" Whenever her sister used her nickname, Amy knew she was trying to get on her good side.

"Well, I guess not since you put it that way, but you know where I am if you need me. I just wanted to say good-bye before we leave for Drew's parents. You will take care of yourself, won't you? I mean you won't try bronc busting or cattle roping right away, will you?"

Amy smiled in spite of herself. "No, I don't think I'll have time for such hobbies for the first couple of days anyway. Listen, don't worry about me, I can take perfectly good care of myself. Besides, we've both agreed to write regularly, and you and Drew promised to visit at the end of the summer."

"I know, but there's something about you going out to the wide-open country alone with those cowboys and Indians," Tracey teased.

"Hey, listen, big sis, you've always been the mother hen where I'm concerned, but it's time this little chic-a-dee left the nest, don't you think?"

"Oh, of course, you're right as usual but ..."
"But, you'd better be getting to the airport if you expect to catch your flight," Amy interrupted, trying to avoid another emotional farewell.

"Okay, honey, but if you need anything, anything at all, just give us a shout. Promise?"

"I promise. I'll drop you a line in the next week or so." Amy began to feel the parting from her older sister. "Bon voyage."

"Bye, dear." There was the same brief silence as in the beginning, before the dial tone signaled Amy to replace the receiver.

Slowly Amy hung up the phone and rested her head in her hands. Once again she traveled back to her darkened past. This very moment she felt as alone and unidentified as she had just after her parents' accident. Looking at the now silent telephone, her thoughts returned to Tracey.

Yes, there was Tracey. Although Amy knew she had her older sister to turn to, she just couldn't reach out to her the way Tracey felt that she should. Perhaps it was because Tracey had always kept a more distant relationship with their parents. During the last six months of their parents' lives, Tracey's full devotions had been centered around her plans for her future life with her husband, Drew. Maybe Amy blamed her, or maybe she envied her in some odd way; she still wasn't sure which was true. Oh, she knew that Tracey loved them both dearly, but it was as if the hurt ran deeper channels for Amy. The very idea of trying to make a new home in the house that had always been filled with the love and laughter of her parents gave Amy an uncontrollable twinge of emotion. She couldn't bear the thought of cleaning the
closets of her parents' personal belongings or replacing some of the rooms' worn furnishings.

Amy shook her head to clear her mind, but yet another dark element of her past remained to haunt her—Scott Madison. The months following the funeral had brought Amy closer to her co-worker and two-year fiancé. Out of love and desperation she had clung to him until she had faced another fatal blow. Without warning, Scott had broken their engagement to reunite with his former wife. Though several of her close friends had hinted that he was seeing someone else, Amy had blindly locked Scott in her trust. However, after one long and unexpected weekend of Scott's absence, she had questioned him about the possibility of another woman. And, now as she recalled, he neither denied the situation nor did he offer a valid explanation. But she had accepted his response. Amy just couldn't believe that she'd been so trusting and vulnerable.

"Well, he got what he deserved," she muttered as she recalled his abrupt dismissal from Cromwell Enterprises. Her only regret was that she wasn't the person who had discovered his misplacement of company funds.

After her devastating break-up with Scott, and a long aftermath of feeling that she had no particular place in life, the seeming answer to her identity problem was suddenly dropped in her lap. Jason Williams, the family attorney, had appeared on her doorstep, presenting her with the deed to her Uncle Jake's ranch in Colorado. At first, Amy was puzzled. Nearly three years had passed since Jake's death, and she had not once been notified that she was the heir to
his estate. The reason, Jason had confidently assured her, was that according to the will, all financial matters had to be settled before the property could be released.

Without reservation Amy had accepted ownership of the ranch and had decided to leave New York as soon as possible. Before speaking to Mr. Cromwell, she had discussed her intentions with Tracey. Of course, as Amy had expected, Tracey held no interest in life on a cattle ranch. The thought of the ranch sent Amy back to her first break toward independence.

Being the more dominant of the two siblings, she had convinced Tracey to accept her half of their home as a wedding gift. Although their parents had left each of them one-half ownership of the family home, Amy felt they would have understood their reasoning. Besides, she knew the little house in the suburbs would never be the same. Amy was also thankful that Tracey offered her full support—especially after the death of their parents when she decided to share a flat with a couple of friends in order to try to regain her identity.

"Miss O'Rally, I'm ready to speak with you, now." The familiar voice broadcasting over the inter-office intercom system brought her back to the present. Straightening the pleats in her navy skirt, she pivoted and walked toward Mr. Cromwell's office. As she entered the room, her heels were instantly cushioned by the plush white carpeting. Walking past the large conference table that centered the elaborate office, Amy's eyes scanned the unique design of the L-shaped alcove that led to another series of offices and conference rooms.

"Please sit down," a deep voice echoed from the entrance of the
"Of course," Amy answered nervously. Quickly, she looked at the graying executive sitting behind a large oak desk, and again was astonished at his youthful appearance. One would never guess Mr. Cromwell to be a man well into his sixties. His choice of wardrobe was always of high fashion and youthful taste. From his exquisitely tailored pin-striped suit to his custom-made leather shoes, there was never a doubt that this man was an executive for a fashion designer firm. With an admiring glance at him, Amy chose a chair to Mr. Cromwell's left and tried to make herself comfortable.

"Amy, let's make this meeting as informal as possible," he said as he removed his reading glasses and placed them on a stack of papers on the desk.

Relaxing a little in her chair, she nodded in agreement.

"You've been with this company three years now, and we like to think of you as an important asset. You know, you've always gone beyond your duties as my private secretary to assist me in any way you could. In fact, since Madison left, we've been considering you to fill his position as administrative assistant for costume design."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Cromwell, but under the circumstances I'm afraid I'll have to turn down your offer," she interrupted.

Clearing his throat, Harry Cromwell reached for his pipe and carefully lit the aromatic British tobacco. Drawing deeply on the pipe stem, he rose from his chair and walked over to a nearby window, trailing small clouds in his wake.
For a moment the room was silent. The only presence recognized by either person was the rich aroma of the burning tobacco.

Finally, he turned a serious face toward Amy. "I knew you'd turn us down flat right now. But what about later? I know you've been through a lot lately, and I agree that you need a rest."

"I think I know what you're going to say," Amy interjected. "But I don't ..."

"Please let me finish." He cut her short with a wave of his hand. "I might as well be direct, Amy," he added with authority. "The firm is refusing to accept your letter of resignation."

"But ..." she tried again.

"Now hear me out," he insisted. "You may like what I have to say. After discussing the matter with the board members, I've decided to freeze the position of administrative assistant and grant you one year's leave of absence. At any time within that year if you decide to return to Cromwell Enterprises, your new office is waiting. In other words, we won't accept your present decision until the end of one year. Don't worry about who'll take over the position temporarily; I have a young nephew who has just graduated from New York University, and he'd do most anything to get to know the business."

Looking into the kind, but stern, eyes of her boss, Amy knew defeat. She couldn't argue with him once his mind was made up. "All right, Mr. Cromwell, but I don't think I'll change my mind."

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said, smiling warmly. "So, when do you plan to leave?"

"Probably tomorrow." Amy's tone lightened.
"You're coming to our little get-together tonight, aren't you?"

"Sure, I wouldn't miss it." She tried to sound enthusiastic. She knew what a "little get-together" meant to Harry Cromwell. Being president of the most prominent fashion designer firm in New York, he never had to worry whether he would have ample guests at his parties. Amy bade him good-bye and left the office to find a cab.

Stepping through the revolving doors onto a world of concrete, Amy gazed at the fast life about her. As she breathed in the smoggy air and went through the ritual of hailing a cab, she knew that she needed to get away. That is, she hoped she would be able to find a different life in Colorado. Just being totally on her own would give her the independence she so desperately needed.

After tipping the cabbie generously, Amy stepped out in front of the modern apartment building. Pausing before the looming structure, she thought of the happiness she had shared here with her friends. This was one of the reasons that she felt the least bit of doubt about leaving. But she knew that it was time for the childish good times and parties to come to an end. She was tired of being sheltered by this plush brick guardian. The real world and all its ruggedness was waiting for her to conquer it, and that she intended to do.

Quickly she stopped and gathered her mail before climbing to the third floor. For some reason, these past few days had forbidden her to take the elevator. The sound of country and western music from inside her apartment signified her roommates were home waiting her return.
"SURPRISE!" Amy's roommates, Stacey and Karen, echoed as she opened the door. Before she could maneuver herself into the living room, she was affectionately attacked by the two young women.

"Hey, you guys!" she chuckled. "What's going on here?" She looked around the living room that was decorated with paper streamers and balloons.

"You don't think we'd let you leave us without a little going away party, do you?" Karen's eyes flashed.

"Besides, we needed an excuse to break out the bubbly." Stacey held up a bottle of champagne.

"Oh, you two, I love you both." Tears blurred Amy's vision.

"Now, you promised us no tears." Karen tried to hide the emotion creeping into her voice.

"Enough of this small talk. I want a glass of champagne." Amy reached for the corkscrew.

One drink later, the three girls sat around the large living room sofa on the thickly carpeted floor that shut out the sounds of their movements. They, too, became quiet.

"Well, are you going to forget us city slickers when you turn into a reformed ranchhand?" Karen broke the silence.

"Of course not, you know I'll always remember you two. If you hadn't taken me in and helped heal my wounds, it's hard to say where I'd be right now. Besides, you've both promised to spend your vacation with me in Colorado."

"You bet we will. Why, I've already started packing my duds," Stace offered as Karen suddenly remembered a message for Amy.
"Oh, Jason Williams called to confirm that he would be escorting you to Mr. Cromwell's dinner party tonight."

"Did you have to remind me of that party? I'm just not in the mood for one of those dry business parties. Oh well, maybe Jason can come up with some kind of excuse for us to leave early."

"Amy, Karen and I have been thinking. Since you haven't been out much lately, maybe we should help you get dressed up for your last social fling in New York. Oh, by the way, you don't have a choice."

"I guess you're right, Stacey. At least it would look rather convincing to Mr. Cromwell," Amy agreed.

"What time is Jason going to pick you up, anyway?" Karen asked.

"Oh, sevenish," Amy answered indifferently.

"Well, it's five-thirty now, so we better get a move on if we're going to have Cinderella ready for the ball." Stacey began to collect their empty glasses.

"Now girls, the party is over. Amy, you scoot to the shower while Stacey and I prepare your dress for tonight," Karen ordered.

Languidly, Amy rose from the living room floor and padded to the bathroom. During her shower, the other two girls busily prepared her wardrobe for the dinner party.

Amy wasn't even allowed to dry her own hair but was entirely at the mercy of Stacey and Karen. Quickly and expertly they styled her thick copper hair into delicate spiral curls woven through a white satin ribbon. Next, a light application of foundation, blush, and mascara was applied to Amy's near-perfect complexion. Her deep set violet eyes needed no shadows to accent their beauty. Finally, her
roommates helped her to slip into a light blue chiffon evening gown, whose delicate material added a subtle fullness to a stylish French skirt.

"Now we'll allow you to do the honors of the final touch," Stacey said, handing Amy a long velvet case.

"My, what can this be?" Amy asked, looking at her two friends as she opened the fragile jewelry box.

"Ooh, you shouldn't have! Why, these must have cost each of you a month's salary!" Amy enchantedly admired the string of blue pearls and matching earrings.

"This is our way of thanking you for being such a delightful roommate," Karen remarked. "After all, they could be fake, you know."

"Are you two going to gawk over the pearls, or are we going to see how Amy looks with them around her neck?" Stacey interrupted, hoping to avoid a tearful situation.

Amy accepted the pearls and clasped the delicate strand at her slender throat. After clipping the accenting earrings in place, she stood back for their approval. The creamy pearls caught a shimmer of light and glistened like little blue stars. Her eyes, too, caught the shimmer, giving Amy a look of royalty.

"My, you do look beautiful," Karen gasped, gently twirling Amy before the large wall mirror.

"Boy, those tough cowpokes don't know what they're in for," Stacey giggled. She placed a pair of white pumps and a matching bag near the dressing table.

"They may not want to know after they discover my bad side," Amy
chuckled, slipping the pumps onto her stockinged feet.

Just as Stacey opened her mouth to disagree with Amy's last comment, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Karen said breathlessly.

"Amy, it's Jason," Karen called.

"All right. Be right there." Amy gave Stacey a quick hug and a thank-you, then headed for the living room.

Jason stood there waiting by the doorway. His face registered admiration when he saw Amy.

"You look ravishing. If I were only thirty years younger, I'd make a play for your heart," the fatherly attorney bragged lovingly. The black and white tuxedo gave him a look of suave sophistication, matching her own.

"Jason," she said holding her hands out toward his. "You look quite handsome yourself. I always like to see a man in a dinner jacket."

"Thank you, fine lady. Shall we go?" He held his arm out for her.

During the long drive to the Cromwell estate, Amy was rather quiet and withdrawn. The passing traffic and street lamps were merely vague images as her mind dwelled on her trip to Colorado.

"Come down to earth, child. Why are you so quiet?" Jason asked after several minutes of silence.

"I was just thinking. Do you think you could make excuses for us at the party so we won't be obligated to stay very long?"

"Sure, honey, but why?"
"Well, I'm a little tired and I have some packing to finish before I leave tomorrow."

"If that's what you want. Listen, it's pretty obvious that you aren't in the mood for this party. Would you like me to stop at a phone and make our apologies? And, if you want, we can take sort of a farewell tour of Brooklyn."

"Jason, you're a jewel. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"I'm most sure. You know me. I don't like these stiff business dinners, anyway," he added.

As soon as he saw a telephone booth, Jason maneuvered the sedan to the curb. Upon his return, he assured Amy the matter was taken care of.

"Now, where would you like to go?"

"Could we go to a quiet restaurant and just talk for a little while? I'd really like to get to bed early tonight; I've got a long day tomorrow," she almost pleaded.

"Your wish is my command." Jason smiled down at her before he directed the vehicle toward the highway.

After a half hour of weaving in and out of the city traffic, they found themselves in front of a chic French restaurant overlooking the Hudson River where Jason soon received a ticket from the valet and escorted Amy into the romantic establishment.

Amy found herself enjoying the relaxed atmosphere of the softly lighted foyer. The plush blue carpeting and the lavishly velveted guest chairs made their short wait quite enjoyable.

"Une table pour deux, s'il vous plaît," Jason instructed the
"This way, monsieur." The maitre d' directed them to a table for two overlooking the shimmering river.

"Jason, your French is exquisite." Amy smiled as she linked her arm through his and followed the maitre d' to their table.

"I'm glad he answered in English; that's about as far as my French vocabulary will take me." Their light laughter seemed to fill the screened terrace where a flower-laden table awaited them.

A cool breeze blew across the terrace, setting a calm, intoxicating mood. The city's distant lights reflected glistening images upon the romantic moon-lit Hudson. But for Amy the romantic effect soon dissipated. Gazing around them, she noticed several couples whispering love secrets across their tables, or reaching out to each other with poetic gestures. It was at moments such as this that a part of her yearned for the security of a permanent relationship. But the thought of the pain, that accompanied such a relationship, redirected her attention to Jason, placing their thin order for wine and salad.

"Jason," Amy began. "Tell me once again about the ranch. I want to be sure I'll know what to expect when I arrive."

"Well, all I know is that it is being taken care of by an overseer."

"Did Uncle Jake's attorney mention a name?" she asked curiously,

"No, he didn't. I'm sorry, honey, but I've told you all I know. What's wrong, are you getting nervous?"

"Yes, I guess that's it. I'm just a little eager to start my new life, that's all."
Chapter Two

Amy coughed and choked on the thick clouds of dust that rolled through the window of the jeep with every jolting movement. Ever since she had begun her journey, she had silently cursed herself for trading her smart little sports coupe for this so-called durable Suburban.

To prevent further inhalation of the powdery residue, she blindly reached for her already dust-filled kerchief. No sooner had she stopped peering at the rugged trail, than the rattling jeep lurched forward, and the interior of the vehicle was engulfed in the smoky film.

In a desperate attempt to control her strained emotions and the lurching jeep, Amy brought the Suburban to a safe, but abrupt, halt. With a stifling moan, she wondered sarcastically whatever had happened to the fresh Colorado mountain air she remembered as a child.

Then slowly redirecting the vehicle onto the questionable roadway, she took a quick look at herself in the rearview mirror, and with a sigh of disgust dismissed her tattered appearance until she arrived at her planned destination.

A brief glance at her watch showed she had been traveling this route for nearly an hour. No wonder her throat ached from thirst and her limbs felt numbed by the painful lurching of the jeep.

"Well," she muttered out loud. "According to the directions
given by the gas station attendant over fifteen miles back, I should be reaching Uncle Jake's ranch any minute now."

Suddenly, through a gusting cloud of dust she saw a roadside sign that read "O'Rally and ... Inc." The absence of the second name on the signboard puzzled her; she was quite sure she had never seen the words "and ... Inc." on that shingle before.

She made a mental note to ask Jason about the sign as soon as she was settled in her new home.

With her thoughts still on the sign, she shrugged her shoulders and negotiated the hairpin turn, which descended onto a slightly more civilized downgrade through the Colorado mountains.

The dust subsided and revealed a marvelous panorama. Surrounded by rough uncultured mountain terrain, the ranch stood picturesque in the valley below. It was even more beautiful than she had remembered. The sprawling—yet comfortable—ranchhouse constructed of roughhewn Colorado timber ornamented the once-rugged land on which it was erected.

Small rolling hills east of the ranch were dressed in a spectrum of alluring shades of greens and pinks produced by the budding wild dogwoods and rhododendrons. Amy smiled eagerly to herself as she steered the jeep down the steep hill.

The jeep jolted and spat bravely before it died in a mist of steam; "It's a good thing that I made it to the main gate," she sighed wearily. After three attempts to start the exhausted engine, she gave up hope and gathered a few pieces of her most needed belongings before starting the long walk toward the ranch.

"I wish I hadn't worn these blasted heels," she exclaimed angrily
as she trudged over the rocky ruts which led to the main drive.

Her struggling attempt to remain upright was interrupted by a man's deep voice. "Hey, you better be careful. Those rocks are tricky, especially when you're wearing stilts." It was too late for her to heed his warning; as soon as she heard the stranger speak, she lost all concentration, wrenched her ankle, and went toppling like a limp ragdoll into the adjacent ditch.

Before she could open her mouth in protest, strong arms lifted her out of her awkward predicament and laid her safely on the ground above the trench.

"Just who do you think you are? I could have broken my neck," she spat at him.

"I think you should answer that question yourself since you're on private property."

"I know who I am. I happen to own this land." Her violet eyes shot fire at him. "Do you work here? I'll have your job for this," she hissed.

The stranger's expression was cold and lifeless. His steel-gray eyes seemed to cut through her rage. As her glance met his, a strange uncontrollable shudder ran the full length of her spine.

While she was trying to understand this strange feeling, his grip tightened on her arm, causing her to wince with pain.

"I'd watch what I say if I were you since I'm not who you think I am," he growled through clenched teeth as his grip on her upper arm became vice-like.

As a result of her now throbbing arm and ankle, Amy released a
muffled cry for mercy.

Instantly, as if he realized the degree of agony he was causing her, the cold-gray eyes seemed to lose some of their hardness, and he loosened his grip.

"It's quite obvious that ankle needs medical attention, so I suggest we finish our friendly conversation later," the man said dryly. Amy sighed in relief, for she didn't know how much of this torture she could bear.

"Here, let me help you under that oak tree so you can relax while I see to putting your jeep in running order. It's quite a walk to the ranch yet, and I'm in no mood to carry you there. In fact, I doubt if we would ever reach the ranch at all."

Before she could reply, strong arms around her waist lifted her on her feet to see if she could stand. Staggering from the painful weight on her ankle, she pitched forward and found her head leaning on the rippling muscles of his chest. In an attempt to push herself from their sudden embrace, her hands rested in the thick protruding hair that filled the gap in the front opening of his western shirt.

Her struggles were useless. His towering height loomed over her petite frame. As she raised her head in one last protest, his mouth came down on hers with such an urgency it rocked her very being.

For a moment nothing else mattered; her mind had succumbed to her physical desires. Each touch of his wandering lips burned her flesh with an intensity she had never known. As she clung to him in total submission, his body went rigid and she pushed him away from her reluctantly.
"Now that's what I consider a proper introduction," he said in a taunting manner.

Regaining her composure, she shrieked, "You lousy jackal!" Her fingertips touched her bruised lips, and she struck out at him, leaving a stinging mark on his face.

His body stiffened once again as he stroked his reddened cheek. Anger flushed over his face. Then, without warning, he swung her into his arms, lifting her easily, and firmly deposited her beneath the giant oak.

As he paused to check her position, he removed his hat and idly scratched his head. She couldn't help noticing the ebony curls, sprinkled with premature gray, that framed the strong lines of his facial structure. His maturity was obvious; Amy guessed him to be thirty-seven or thirty-eight.

Aware that she was staring, he broke the silence. "Oh, by the way, I'm pleased to meet you, Miss O'Rally. I'm Marcus Thorn." And he flashed an impish grin that revealed perfect ivory teeth, then turned toward the road.

Amy's eyes gaped in bewilderment at his knowledge of her surname, for she was most certain she hadn't introduced herself. However, the importance of the subject was dropped as her gaze registered his litheful movements when he stalked away.

The clicking sounds from his boot-clad heels brought her attention to his masculine frame. Even at a distance, the virility of his physique was evident. He stood well over six feet, and his male features, like the land, bore a certain roughness. The broad muscular shoulders
that tapered to a slender waist and narrow hips, subtly accentuated the leanness of his long legs. The entire bulk of him dominated the ruddy one-lane road on which he walked. A rough man in a rough environment.

"DAMN HIM!" she thought. Her face flamed with embarrassment at her sudden attraction to this arrogant cowhand. This sudden surge of anger brought her to her feet. Grimacing at each painful step, Amy hobbled toward the ranchhouse. Her determination not to further submit to any of his demands, allowed her to keep her footing on the rocky path.

Perspiration beaded on her forehead; her respiration quickened as the thick copper hair, that was usually her shining glory, smothered her neck and shoulders. With each tortuous step she took, the verdant countryside became nothing more than a darkened blur.

Despite a futile attempt to keep herself upright, Amy felt herself falling--falling as if she would never stop. Just as she gave up all hope of survival, something hard and powerful caught her and brought her to safety before her lifeless body struck the hard earth below.

During the confusing moments that followed, she was dimly aware of being lifted ever so gently and laid on the front seat of her Suburban. The faint sound of a door closing kept her temporarily in a semi-conscious state. She tried to open her eyes, but her aching head and throbbing foot would not allow her to.

Nausea clawed her parched throat until it was impossible for her to exert the slightest physical movement. And, the strength of competent hands caressing her damp brow was the last bit of reality
she recalled before her surrounding world faded into total darkness ....

For the next twenty-four hours Amy slept fitfully, weaving in and out of consciousness. She thought she remembered being undressed by skilled hands and later feeling the coolness of fresh linen against her fevered skin. Also, somewhat vaguely she recalled someone repeating her name over and over and trying to force some warm liquid into her mouth. Though she tried to answer, she fell into an exhausted and dreamless sleep.

A full day later, she awoke to muffled voices in an adjacent room and to the sound of tiny sparrows singing outside her bedroom window.

Sitting upright, she yawned lazily and stretched her body in a cat-like manner—arching her back and reaching toward the ceiling with extended arms.

As she casually glanced around the room to gain her bearings, her childhood stood vividly before her. This was her beloved Aunt Ellen's bedroom, and everything was the same as she remembered it more than fifteen years ago.

Though some of the furnishings had been refinished, the entire suite still gave Amy the same secure feeling as it did when Aunt Ellen cuddled her in safe arms during the summer storms.

Rose-patterned wall paper accented the deep reddish brown in the old four-poster canopy on which she was lying; detailed hand-carved roses sculpted in the bed's sturdy cherrywood had been crafted by the loving hands of her Uncle Jake.
Tenderly her hands began to fondle the crocheted lace coverlet, matching bed curtains, and ruffled canopy drape that had been tailored by her Aunt Ellen. As her solemn eyes traced the entire room, she noticed the matching lace draperies and cornice that covered the small bay window near her bedstand.

The old bentwood rocker stood in its usual position near the French doors opening onto the veranda. Oh, how she had once loved to sit out there in the evenings and watch her aunt stitch beautiful lace patterns. It was during those captivating evenings that she would stare out into the colorful western sky and imagine elephants and giraffes in the huge white cumulus clouds hovering over sloping pasturelands. She would always become lost in the magnificent beauty, and be brought back down to practical matters by Aunt Ellen’s gentle reminders that she had missed a stitch in her little personal chain of lace.

Though the remaining furnishings were simple, Amy treasured them like precious heirlooms. The washstand and porcelain wash basin along with the rustic balsam wardrobe were descended from her grandmother, and years of careful polishing had slickened the woods to a glassy hardness.

As she crept from under the warm bedding, her bare feet touched the large braided rug that covered the smooth lacquered floor boards.

Her first step stabbed her ankle painfully and reminded her of her injury and previous encounter with Marcus Thorn. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, she casually ran her fingers through her hair, and for the first time realized that she was dressed in her own nightgown. The sheerness of the filmy material made her shiver as she
discovered she wasn't wearing any undergarments.

Hot embarrassment flushed her trembling body as she thought of the possibility of Marcus Thorn enjoying such a pleasureful chore. No, he wouldn't dare take such liberties. Would he? Of course not; it was probably the housekeeper. She dismissed the matter from her mind.

After retrieving her robe that had been placed carefully on the chest at the foot of the bed, she limped over to the large swivel mirror to check her appearance.

Despite the long exhausting trip from New York and her sudden illness, Amy looked as beautiful as ever. Even though her height stopped at a mere five-foot-three, her striking features placed her far above any fashion model.

Pushing back a stray tendril of hair from her flushed cheeks, she noticed she had lost weight. In fact, if Aunt Ellen could see her now, she would gently but firmly insist that she eat more, she thought with a faint smile.

Though slim, her slimness complemented her petite frame; at twenty-four, Amy was a blossoming young woman and she still retained the youthful appearance of her teenage years. A veil of copper flax delicately draped the curve of her neck and fell gracefully onto her fragile shoulders. The paleness of her honey-tinted skin lent a vivid contrast to her deep-set violet eyes and thick curly lashes. It was these enchanting features that had persuaded her parents to call her their little china doll.

A knock on the door guided her attention to an old familiar face.
"Martha, is that really you!" exclaimed Amy in an eager voice.

Before the middle-aged housekeeper could set aside the carefully prepared breakfast tray, Amy affectionately hugged her plump body in happy reunion.

Planting a motherly kiss on Amy’s damp forehead, Martha gently scolded. "My word, child, you should be in bed. Why, Mr. Thorn gave me strict orders to see you got plenty of rest until the doctor stops by again later this afternoon."

"Mr. Thorn? What does he have to do with me? Why is he giving you orders?" she challenged with flashing eyes.

"Now, Amy, don't be getting yourself all upset, especially after nearly having a heat stroke. You really shouldn't be up on that ankle. The doctor says it's quite a nasty sprain. Anyway, Mr. Thorn or er ... Marcus, is just a hard-working man who likes to keep things in order. He doesn't mean you any harm."

"How long has he been working here? As soon as I have the estate papers settled, he'll no longer have any obligations to this ranch. I intend to be rid of him!" Anger rose in her voice at the thought of her recent surrender to his sensual demands.

"Enough of that for now. You've been away practically fifteen years now, and you should know there'd be some changes. Here, eat your breakfast while I run you a hot bath." With a questioning gaze, Amy watched the waddling figure leave the room.

Reluctantly, Amy picked up the breakfast tray and hobbled to the bentwood rocker. Propping her foot on an upholstered ottoman, she began nibbling on a piece of dry toast.
"Martha, you didn't answer my question earlier," Amy called through the open door. "How long has Marcus Thorn worked on this ranch? I didn't recall Jason mentioning his employment by Uncle Jake. Besides, I was under the impression all the house workers and ranchhands were let go after Aunt Ellen passed away."

"Now, Amy, hold on; one question at a time," she replied good naturedly from the bathroom. "First of all, Mr. er ... Marcus, has been around for several years, but he's more of a, well, overseer than an employee. And, as for the rest of us, we're here because we love you and this ranch. Are you satisfied?"

"For now," she answered still unconvincing.

"Boy, I was starving," Amy said, as she emptied the remainder of her orange juice. "The traveling must have really tired me out." Her thoughts wandered as she yawned lazily from the comfort of a hearty meal. As she closed her eyes in solitude, Martha interrupted her thoughts. "Honey, it sure is good to have you back here where you belong."

"Yes, it feels great to be back. In fact, I'm beginning to feel rested already."

"Well, I'm glad, but you need a lot more rest. I'm going to take this tray down to the kitchen while you soak. I'll be back a little later to see you're tucked into bed."

The idea of a nice hot bath was too inviting for her to argue. So moaning from stiff and tired muscles, Amy, with Martha's assistance,
limped into the bathroom.

An elaborate antique tub perched on four brass pedestals occupied the western corner of the room. Smiling warmly, her eyes traced the bright copper tubing that scaled the height of the wall and peeked into a shower unit.

The huge oval tub supported Amy's fatigued body as she slowly lowered herself into a deep hot pool of suds. Once again a smile creased her lips when she noticed that Martha had displayed a variety of bath oils and lotions for her convenience.

Erasing her mind of all invading thoughts of Marcus Thorn, Amy mentally planned a tour of the ranch for tomorrow morning.

Absently she reached for a large bath towel, dried herself thoroughly, and dressed in a clean night-shirt and underwear.

Casually she paused at the entrance of the bedroom, retrieved her robe, and chose a copy of National Geographic from the rack near the bed.

She was plumping her pillows and settling herself to read a rather dull article about primitive African chiefs wedding more than one wife, when Martha entered with an older man wearing a gray business suit, covered with a white smock.

"Amy, this is Dr. Samuel Maxwell. He's here to see how you are progressing," explained Martha with twinkling eyes as she smiled at the pleasant-looking general practitioner.

"How's our beautiful patient?" he asked Martha, returning the same sparkling gestures.

"I do believe she is doing much better; she's been up and about
this morning—of course against my better judgment," Martha teased.

"Now, let's have a look at that ankle," he suggested. After the gentle hands skillfully examined her ankle and bruised forehead, he gave his diagnosis.

"Well, little lady, that sprain isn't as bad as it appears." He scratched his silver mustache. "You know, you were very lucky you only received a mild concussion. I believe if you remain in bed today, by tomorrow you should be allowed up, providing you have that ankle wrapped sufficiently."

"I can depend on you seeing that my orders are followed, can't I, Martha?"

"Don't worry, Sam; I've been nursing broken rowhands for years, and I reckon I can tame this one for one day. Oh, by the way, don't forget to leave some bandages so I can bind that foot properly."

"Dr. Maxwell," Amy whispered.

"Oh, since you're practically a member of this family, call me Sam," he smiled, revealing a dimpled chin.

"Okay, Sam. I want to thank you for staying with me last night."

"Shucks, it was my pleasure," he replied blushing.

"That's about the truth of it," Martha chuckled. "He's always had a way with pretty girls."

"Now, I wished I could say that about one certain pretty gal I know. But they say love is blind." His tone matched that of a schoolboy as he gave Martha a rather obvious wink.

Blushing, Martha cleared her throat and changed the direction of the conversation. "Oh dear, look at the time—why I've got loads of
chores to finish before dinner."

"Now, I believe some of my spoken wisdom has hit close to home."
He turned to wink at Amy.

"Oh, pshaw," laughed Martha. "It's just like a man to feed his ego.
Come on, Romeo, I'll see you to the door."

"What, and miss some of those fresh-baked cookies you were taking
out of the oven when I arrived?"

"I never could stand to see a hungry man. Come on, Sam, let's leave
our patient to rest and I'll entertain you in the kitchen."

"That's a compromise." He waved good-bye to Amy.

They're like two courting school kids, Amy thought warmly. Their
playfulness reminded her of her parents' teasing little games.

As Martha reached the door, Amy cleared her throat to get her
attention. "Martha, can I speak to you a moment?" she pleaded.

"Sure, honey. Just a minute." She opened the door and motioned
Sam to meet her downstairs. "What's wrong?" She closed the door quietly.

Nervously twisting the edge of a ruffled pillowcase between her
fingers, Amy initiated the conversation. "Er ... how did I get here
yesterday ... uh ... I mean ... who actually undressed and put me to
bed?"

A sense of understanding mellowed Martha's tone as she answered
Amy's question. "Now, honey, let me say you really gave us all quite
a scare. When Marcus brought you to the house unconscious and blaming
himself for your condition, we were running around this house in a mad
flurry. Of course, Sam was called immediately and Marcus was kind
enough to get you out of those hot clothes while I prepared some cold
packs to cool your fever."

"Oh, that was very kind of him!" Amy pouted. "I'll thank him personally for this. I'll claw his eyes out!" she raged internally.

"Now, you listen to me, young lady! I don't know what happened between you and Mr. Thorn yesterday, and I'm not sure I want to, but he was just as worried about you as we were. He refused to leave your side until Sam arrived, and he further insisted Sam stay several hours as a precaution. Mr. Thorn was up at dawn and stayed with you until he had to catch his flight for Denver.

"You know, since Jake passed along, things need tending to by a man. Like now, Mr. Thorn is participating in a week-long rancher's convention in Denver. He has a good business head on him, honey, and this ranch's cattle sales depend on him."

Angry at herself for being disappointed because Marcus was away, Amy sat upright, still clutching the ruffled pillow even tighter.

"Honey, you don't have to like him. All I'm asking is to give him a little respect," she added, noticing Amy's discomfort.

"Respect, HELL, I'll give him respect!" she thought cruelly while trying to keep a calm expression on her pale face. Somehow she heard herself say to Martha that she would try.

"Good. That's all you can do," she said in a satisfied tone. "Now, enough of this chatter. You need to get some rest. And if I'm going to salvage any cookies, I better catch the 'good doctor' while his hand is still in the cookie jar instead of rubbing his full stomach."

"Get some sleep," whispered Martha as she gently clasped her hands over Amy's. "Things will look brighter tomorrow." Pausing at the door,
she commented with loving humor, "You better relax those fingers; your knuckles are turning blue."

Casually nodding her head in agreement, Amy relaxed her grip and forced a slight smile to ease Martha's tension. She pulled the covers chest-high and pretended to be in a sleep position. Satisfied, Martha left.

After the door closed quietly, Amy angrily shoved her fist into the feather pillow in a fit of rage. Throwing her head down on the hard mattress, she closed her eyes as hot tears of mixed emotions poured down her cheeks and rested in little pools in the base of her neck.

Wiping the stray tears with her trembling fingers, she decided she would think about the situation tomorrow, and she fell into a deep exhausted sleep. Her dreams that night were a series of nightmares—two beasts, one with the head of Marcus Thorn and the other with the head of Scott Madison, were chasing her into a world of total darkness.
Chapter Three

Amy's eyes opened to radiant beams of sunlight dancing throughout her bedroom. The rays reflected vibrant colors from the braided rug and refracted a rainbow spectrum on the rose-patterned wallpaper. A chorus of male lark buntings brought her attention to the opened bay window near her bed. Curious, she crept silently out of bed to snatch a glimpse of the singing flock.

The magnificent black and white plumage of the migrant birds marked the sky in a mosaic pattern as they soared in unison to their winter home in Mexico. Though beautiful, late summer and early fall always seemed rather sad for Amy—it was as if mother nature was reminding the world that nothing was permanent, neither place nor being.

Bracing herself on her stable foot, her eyes sought comfort from the colorful mountains that guarded the distant north section of the ranch. Immediately beneath her she heard the cheerful conversation of the ranchhands and the bawling of new-born calves. The surrounding environment gave her a peaceful feeling, a feeling of actually belonging. Life seemed to call. Hurriedly, she turned to dress so she could begin her day's planned adventure.

Clad in tight western jeans and a bulky flannel shirt, Amy felt prepared to tackle anything. Next, she wove her thick hair into a single braid. But to give herself even more confidence, she accented her attire with a bright red bandanna at her throat and then slipped
into a pair of loose-fitting riding boots. One quick glance in the old framed mirror convinced her that her untanned skin gave a soft contrast to her rugged wardrobe, but she was determined to be hard.

Amy had forgotten the beauty of the dark mahogany banisters running from the carpeted stairwell to the second floor landing. For added support, she grasped the smooth railing as she made her descent.

Pausing at the base of the stairs, she found herself in the entrance to the parlor. The spacious room was sparsely furnished with a large divan, scattered plants, and a few odd chairs and tables. A large rock fireplace covering an entire wall added a touch of ruggedness and, no doubt, extra warmth in the frigid winters. As usual, everything was spotless. She could smell the variety of polishes used to shine the furniture and hearth.

Another aroma soon teased Amy's nostrils--country ham, smoked bacon, and the chicory from fresh-brewed coffee. Inhaling hungrily, she followed her senses into the kitchen.

"Bless my soul, child. You've got more spunk than a new-born foal," Martha chimed, walking toward Amy with her hands perched on her broad hips.

"Good morning," Amy said through a bright smile.

"My, you're up early. Are you sure you're up to it?"

"I sure am. My ankle's only a little tender; and don't forget that I was an executive secretary in New York, and I was always up at daybreak."

"Okay, if you say so, but you sit down right here while I pour you some coffee." Martha casually pointed to a wooden chair at the head
of the large country table.

Amy accepted a cup of the steaming brew and pulled herself closer to the table. "Martha, take a break and join me," she invited.

"I believe I will." She accepted the invitation with gratitude.

"Well, child, tell me about yourself. Fifteen years is a long time. Why did you decide to come back? The last I'd heard, you had a very successful career in New York."

"Well, after Mother and Father were killed in the accident, I decided to move out on my own."

"But didn't you own an equal share of the house with your older sister, Tracey?" Martha interrupted.

"Yes, but I couldn't bear being in that house any longer. There were just too many memories. Without Mom and Dad it wasn't the same anymore. So I gave Tracey my part as a wedding gift when I decided to move back here."

"I think I understand, honey. You were always close to your parents. But what about those years of business college and your job?"

"Oh, I'd like to think all that is behind me now. I mean I learned a lot while away at school, and I'm grateful to Mom and Dad for encouraging me. But, I'm not sure being an executive secretary is really me. After a while it's easy to miss the quiet life."

"Now, that sounds like the Amy I've always known. I always said you belonged here on this ranch. Unlike Tracey, you love the open country. From the time you were a little girl I knew the city couldn't hold you down," Martha said with admiration.

"Thanks for the compliment, I think," Amy chuckled.
"You're welcome, but tell me about that career of yours. It must have been a little more than your love for the country that took you away so fast."

"Martha, you could always read me like a book," Amy said smiling warmly. "I did have a successful career as private secretary to Harry Cromwell, president for one of New York's finest fashion designer firms."

"Didn't you enjoy your work?"

"Oh, yes, I enjoyed my work quite well—perhaps too well. You see, after about one year with the firm I met someone and became romantically involved."

"That's right, I remember you mentioning a possible engagement in one of your letters," Martha said, concerned.

Lines of bitterness ridged Amy's face. "Well, I thought we were engaged until I found out he was planning to return to his former wife."

"I've always said you can't trust those slick executives. Why, they've got about as much backbone as a diamond-back rattle snake. But don't you worry your pretty little head, darlin'. When the right man comes along you'll both know it, and nothing will keep you apart," Martha added, hoping to cheer her up.

"I hope you're right, but I'm beginning to wonder." Amy forced a smile, which looked like a thin line painted on her face.

"So, here you are."

"Yes, so I am. After Uncle Jake passed away, Jason was notified that I had been willed the ranch. And, immediately, I decided that I needed a break from the rat race and a place where I could put my
life back together," Amy sighed.

"What did your boss say to your quick decision?"

"Well, he didn't understand at first, but after he listened to my reasons, he granted me one year's leave of absence. And, so, here I am." Her tone lightened.

"And I'm sure glad you're here, honey, for whatever reason."

"Martha, what's going on here? When Jason told me the only worker he knew of was an overseer, and after three years without an owner, I expected to find the place deserted. I still don't understand how he was misinformed. Do you?" Amy asked pointedly.

"Probably an honest mistake," she answered, raising her palms toward the ceiling. We like to think of this place as our home, too. So don't you go worrying about a little thing like that. You hear?"

Sternness rising in her voice, Amy replied, "I'm no fool, Martha. I know you're protecting me from something, and I'll find out sooner or later."

Hurt crept into Martha's voice as she denied Amy's accusation.

"You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, honey. Besides, you're right. If there is anything going on, you will find it out."

"Oh, what would I ever do without you?" Amy said more softly and gave her a loving pat on the hand. "I will find out, you know," she added.

Martha's moist eyes locked with hers. "I'd better dish up some breakfast before it gets cold," she said.

"This looks sinful," Amy remarked as Martha set the heaping platters of country ham, bacon, and eggs on the table.
"You better eat what you can, girl, before we're stampeded by those hungry ranchhands," Martha chuckled. "Now, you help yourself while I take some of this food out to the bunk house to prevent a riot."

"I sure will," Amy answered hungrily as Martha left the room.

Amy was finishing her meal when Martha returned. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, Martha accompanied her.

"Mmm mm. I couldn't eat another bite," Amy groaned, refusing a second helping of ham and eggs.

"What are your plans for the day?" Martha inquired.

"I thought I'd tour the ranch."

"Do you think that's wise? I mean, with your ankle?"

"Don't worry, I'll be just fine. Most of the swelling is gone, and Dr. Sam said as long as it was wrapped correctly there shouldn't be a problem. Besides, I'm wearing these flat-heeled riding boots," Amy said defensively as she showed the shoes to Martha.

"All right, you win. But promise me you'll take it easy and rest frequently."

"I promise," she answered, raising her right hand.

"Now, if you're going to walk on that foot, let's get that ankle wrapped properly. Follow me to the parlor, little lady," Martha insisted in a motherly manner.

"Yes Mam," she replied with a giggle.

"Now, that should do it. Try your boot and see how it feels." Martha
gathered up the scattered contents of the first aid kit.

"It feels great," Amy announced after she pulled the boot over her bound ankle. "Watch. Practically no limp at all." She paced cautiously in front of Martha. "May I go now?"

"On one condition."

"What's that?"

"You won't attempt to climb any mountains or chase any stray calves," Martha teased.

"Not today, I promise. Besides, I had that planned for tomorrow."
She disappeared through the doorway.

"That girl! She may not know it, but she's the spitting image of Mr. ...," Martha said aloud.

Amy stood in awe admiring the sights of the beautiful Colorado outdoors. The sky was a deep azure blue, and the countryside shimmered as the burning sun highlighted the deep lavender and blues of the columbine, dotting the dew-kissed mountains.

"Is that really you, Miss Amy?" A coarse voice broke her hypnotic state.

"Toby? My, you haven't changed a bit!" Amy exclaimed as she embraced his small weathered frame and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

"Shuck, Amy, you always were a charmer," he answered shyly as he spit a streak of brown tobacco juice. Switching the large plug to the opposite cheek, he replied. "Ole Zeke and Duke are still around too. Come on out to the barn and see em."

"Great, let's go." Eagerly throwing her arm around Toby's shoulder,
Amy pulled him in the direction of the barn.

The barnyard was alive with workers and animals. In the adjacent corral near the left side of the barn, several ranchhands were wrestling young calves for the season's branding. A group of geese passed directly in front of Toby and Amy nearly causing them to stumble. An old basset hound whom Toby referred to as Barney escorted them to the barn entrance. The sounds of calves bawling and geese honking gave the barnyard a sense of natural vitality.

As Amy reached for the rustic barn door, Susan, the family mouser, purred lazily about her feet. The smell of fresh hay and horses filled the spacious room. It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust from the bright sun to the dim lighting in the barn. After focusing on the stalls of horses and tack, she caught the sight of two men hard at work laying new bed for the stock.

"Zeke! Duke! I can't believe it!" She practically shrieked at the sight of the two middle-aged cowboys. "I'd never thought I'd see you all here again," she exclaimed with open arms.

Throwing down their pitch forks and dusting their soiled Levis with their bandannas, the two men hurried to the center of the barn.

"Well, gal, if you ain't a sight for sore eyes," Zeke drawled as he gave her a bear hug.

"Now, I don't know about that. My eyes are jest dandy, and she's still a mighty pretty sight," Duke replied, as he hugged her on the other side.

"Duke, I see you still have that sense of humor," Amy teased.

"And it's still as dry as ever." Zeke pulled Duke's worn Stetson
over his ears.

"Now, you guys, stop the horse-play and stand back so I can get a good look at you. Why, how do you do it? You're still as handsome as ever."

The two cowhands were a picture of Western roughness. Both were dressed accordingly in faded Levis, loud-checked flannels, and scarred Stetsons. The leathery toughness of their skin showed many years of dedication to the O'Rally ranch.

"What about me? Have you forgotten me so soon?" Toby interrupted, pretending to be hurt.

"Of course not. How could I forget the best bronc buster this side of Montana," Amy cooed.

"Uh ... uh ...," Duke and Zeke cleared their throats simultaneously.
"Excuse me, Mam, but you're now looking at the new ranch foreman, Master Toby," Zeke boasted.

"Well, congratulations, Toby," she beamed like a delighted child. "And just when did this promotion take place?"

"After Jake became ill, he decided he needed a good foreman, so he figured ole Toby was the best man fer the job and christened him the foreman," Zeke ribbed the now embarrassed Toby.

"The truth is, Amy, I think old Jake figured I was getting a little too old for bronc busting so he wanted to give me an easier job."

"Being a foreman isn't an easy job, and I'm sure you're the right man for the position," Amy reassured him. "Besides, you're not ready to be put out to pasture yet. Now, what about you boys?" she said, pointing toward Zeke and Duke.
"You ought to know better than ta ask us a silly question like that. Why, this ranch can't do without us! We're the best range riders in the state." Zeke's eyes twinkled.

"Oh, pardon me. Of course not, and I apologize," Amy added with a bright smile.

"Enough of that hogwash, Zeke. What do ya think of the place, Amy?" Toby interrupted.

"It's as beautiful as ever from what I've seen. By the way, would one of you handsome fellas help me choose a good horse so I can do a little exploring?"

"I will, Miss Amy," Toby answered. "But you're not planning to ride the range alone, are you?"

"I don't see why not. I've been on a horse since I was five."

"Yeah, but you've been away for a long time."

"Contrary to your belief, New York also has horses. In fact, I'm an active member of a prominent riding academy."

"Er ... I didn't mean to question your horsemanship," he apologized. "I was more concerned about er ... your foot, that's all."

"Toby, I assure you I won't be sitting on my foot. Now, if you won't help me choose a suitable horse, I'll do it myself." she argued sternly.

"All right, you win. But you best let me do the choosin'! I've got orders to see you stay out of trouble and don't harm yourself."

"By whom, may I ask? I thought you were the ranch foreman around here."

"I am." Toby stood a little straighter to suggest his authority.
"But, well uh ... Mr. Thorn is overseeing the place now, so we all got to keep him happy. Besides, he's right, you know. You do need to be careful."

"None of us need to worry about keeping Mr. Thorn happy any longer. That man can take perfectly good care of himself. As of today you're looking at the new overseer, and if you have any problems, just come to me," Amy added, her anger rising at the mere thought of Marcus Thorn.

Toby carefully changed the subject. "Uh ... we better get to choosin' you a horse if you intend to be back by lunch."

"You're right," she agreed and followed him to the horse stalls.

"I think Bonnie here is the best trail horse we have," Toby smiled, pointing to a pretty sorrel mare. But Amy's attention was captured by a beautiful gray stallion in the stall opposite Bonnie's.

"Oh, is he ever a beauty!" she said, while moving closer to the stud's cubicle. But Amy's sudden approach spooked the giant horse. Rearing on powerful hind legs, the stallion began to paw and kick at the appearance of a stranger.

"Whoa, steady, boy!" Toby commanded, as he pushed Amy behind him. "You'd better watch this one; he's plenty full of spirit."

"Thunder. That name seems to suit him," she muttered after reading the name plate on the door. "Toby, this is no ranch horse." She looked more closely at his huge muscular anatomy. "Why, this is an Arabian stallion."

"He sure is, and a true thoroughbred," Toby answered proudly.

"Who does he belong to? I'd like to ride this magnificent animal just once to see what he can do."
"Oh, you can't do that, Miss Amy. I mean, er ... the owner wouldn't take kindly to strangers riding his horse."

"So he's boarded here, then?" asked Amy with disappointment in her voice.

"Sort of. Yeah, you could say that."

"Who's the owner?"

"Well, uh ... you best ask Mr. Thorn about that. He takes care of this horse himself."

Trying not to become upset at the mention of Marcus Thorn again, she silently agreed to ask him more than just who owned the stallion.

Before she could object to Toby's previous selection of mounts, he had Bonnie out of her stall and was cinching the saddle girth around her middle.

"You two make handsome companions," Toby bragged with a smile.

"She is quite a looker with her red coat and yellow mane," Amy agreed.

"You're not so bad yourself," Toby added blushing.

"Thanks, Toby. You really know how to win a girl's heart."

Shyly ignoring Amy's last statement, Toby added, "Well, she's ready when you are. Here, give me your hand."

"Up you go." Toby effortlessly boosted her upon the horse's back.

"Steady, girl," Amy whispered as she gently patted Bonnie's sleek neck and front flanks.

"Are you sure you don't want one of us to ride out with you?" Toby asked, concerned.

"No, thanks, I'll be all right. Besides, you said yourself that
old Bonnie here is the best trail horse on the ranch."

With both hands on the reins, she gently urged the horse forward by digging her heels gently into the horse's rear flanks. Just outside the barn, she turned to wave at the three men who were patiently watching her.

"Toby was right," Amy thought, as Bonnie carried her skillfully and steadily over the rough trail leading into the canyon beyond the range. Laughing to herself, she imagined traveling this rough terrain on the back of Thunder. For a moment she was galloping over the open range, jumping rough creek beds, and soaring in the wind like a giant eagle.

Her daydreams ended when she noticed Bonnie was no longer moving. The little mare had stopped to drink at one of the water holes.

"You're thirsty, huh, girl? Well, while you quench your thirst, I'm going to stretch my legs." Bonnie didn't seem to notice Amy carefully dismounting and tying the loose reins to a convenient bush.

Lowering herself onto a bed of velvet moss, Amy lay down with her legs crossed and idly tucked her arms beneath her head. As she stared lazily into the Western sky, she began to take in the scenic beauty.

For miles she could see the enormous white-topped mountains that encaged the grazing lands and rocky terrain of the gullies. The different sizes and shapes of the peaks lent beauty to their ruggedness. It had always been hard for her to imagine on a hot day like today the frigid coldness atop those snow-capped giants. The icy whiteness etched the same zig-zag pattern on each mountain except those whose tops were
shrouded by dense fog.

On the distant sloping foothills the yellow pine and blue spruce flourished. On the higher, rockier slopes, her eyes caught the beauty of one of nature's masterpieces. Over a period of many years, the strong winds had turned giant pines into bent and gnarled sculptures. Some of these sinister statues didn't resemble trees but large skeletal fingers, stretching toward the mountains.

The sound of rolling thunder brought her attention to the darkening sky. These western storms could strike with a terrifying suddenness. Bonnie stirred restlessly, and the aspens began to sway from the gusting wind. Quickly Amy mounted her horse. Turning Bonnie in the direction of the ranch, she nudged her forward. Bonnie obeyed willingly and started at a fast trot.

The storm was approaching fast. Amy noticed several chipmunks, red foxes, and jack rabbits scurrying to their safe underground dens. A loud clap of thunder signaled Bonnie to break her present gait and to begin a full gallop. To counteract the blasting wind, Amy crouched, and leaning on Bonnie's strong neck, she gave the competent horse free rein. Without warning, Bonnie turned sharply to the east away from the ranch.

The suddenness of the turn threw Amy off balance, and she nearly fell when she lost control of the bridle reins. Momentarily she panicked. Not only were the dangling reins a dangerous threat for the horse and rider, but she was sure she and Bonnie were heading toward the eye of the storm. Amy winced at the painful pressure she applied to her ankle as she bore down on the stirrups. She must retrieve the reins. If she fell in the process, she would definitely be trampled by the galloping
horse—but still, if Bonnie tripped, they both would suffer severe injury.

Digging her knees into the sides of the saddle, Amy grasped Bonnie's mane with her left hand while her right hand snatched at the dangling right rein. She gasped nervously as she retrieved her target. Now the other one. Taking an opposite position, she swiped at the strap that was lashing Bonnie's front left flank. As she leaned forward, Bonnie stumbled and Amy almost vaulted over the horse's neck.

In a last desperate attempt, Amy reached for the idle rein. This time she was successful.

Her hands were numb. She couldn't feel the reins clutched between her cold fingers. Nervous perspiration dripped from her brow, and her breath was labored. She quickly pulled back on the reins and tried to turn Bonnie to the right, but she fought against Amy's demands. Without breaking stride, Bonnie kept galloping in the opposite direction.

After what seemed minutes, Amy noticed the wind had calmed and the sky had lightened. Bonnie had changed her pace to a slow trot. This time when she pulled back on the bridle, Bonnie responded and came to a halt. Belwildered, Amy pivoted on her saddle and looked back toward the ranch. She couldn't believe her eyes. The distant sound of thunder and the dark gray clouds hanging over the range signified the storm had hit and was moving away from them toward the ranch.

"Well, old girl, Toby was right. You're a darn good trail horse. Why, you must have sensed that the storm was changing directions, and you brought us here where we would be safe," Amy said, rubbing Bonnie's lathered neck. "You deserve a reward," she praised, as she began to
unsaddle the mare. "Now, you rest here a few minutes, and as soon as the storm has blown over, we'll head home and get some lunch."

Amy deposited the heavy tack on the hard ground and sat on the warm saddle. While Bonnie grazed quietly, she decided to check her own ankle. "Why, I do believe that I'll live, Bonnie," she chuckled in relief as she noticed that her foot showed no signs of swelling.

In contrast to the darkened western sky, the overhead sun warmed her skin beautifully. Enormous bushes of Spanish bayonet decorated the surrounding open prairie. Sometimes she wondered how something so fragile could survive the extremes of the harsh climate here.

Kicking dust and rocks with her riding boots, Amy walked toward one of the nearby thick bushes. She laughed when she thought how she used to weave wreaths of these little flowers into a crown. Her hands began to caress the delicate cream-colored blossoms that were surrounded by thick greenery.

The squawking of a large hawk soaring overhead startled her. But she was relieved when she realized that the graceful bird meant her no harm. Without thinking, she plucked two of the flowers and placed one behind each ear. The pointed leaves of the blossoms covered her ears entirely. Her new accessories gave her the look of a fair Indian maiden.

Unsurprisingly, the storm ceased as quickly as it started. The colorful distant sky indicated the storm had passed. Amy promptly gathered the saddle tack and made ready for their departure.

During their ride across the rain-beaten trail, a cool breeze twirled a loose tendril of Amy's straying hair. "Umm, everything smells
so fresh after a good rain," she thought aloud. Bonnie also seemed to enjoy the coolness of the damp earth beneath her tired hooves, as she trotted gaily on the soft trail.

The ranch house was a welcome sight for both horse and rider. Amy gently nudged Bonnie's sides to increase their speed, and they entered the main gate in a light canter.

Everything in the barnyard had quieted from the storm. The cowhands and animals were casually reentering their routines. As Bonnie and Amy approached the entrance to the barn, a worried Duke and Zeke held the barn doors open for their entrance.

"Good Lord, it's about time," Toby scolded from inside the barn. "You had us all worried sick. If you hadn't come when you did, Zeke and Duke were coming after you."

"Thanks for worrying, but you shouldn't have. Bonnie here rescued us from the storm, and here we are safe and sound." Amy defended herself, failing to mention her hair-raising experience.

"I'll go to the house and tell Martha you're all right. Ever since the rain started, she's been in a frenzy," Toby growled paternally.

"Tell her I'll be in a little later. I owe Bonnie a reward for her good deeds."

"All right, but don't take too long," Toby insisted as he stalked out the door.

"Don't mind him" Duke apologized. "We all know he's an old softie at heart."

"I'll be fine, thanks, Duke." She smiled down at him. "Where are the grooming tools kept? I want to give Bonnie a good rubdown. We
had a long hot ride today."

"They're over there in the groomer's box near the stalls. Gee, Amy, I wish I could stay and help ya, but I got to head out on the range and see if the storm rustled up some stray calves."

"I insist you do your job. Besides, I owe this one to Bonnie as a personal favor," she reassured him.

Very slowly Amy climbed off Bonnie's back and began gathering the necessary tools. Before starting to oil the tack, she laid a warm blanket across the mare's back.

Bonnie made soft gurgling sounds as Amy briskly removed the thick trail dust with a hard brush. After she was satisfied that all the dust was removed, she curried Bonnie's mane and tail until the coarse strands of hair lay in ribbons of soft flax. As a final gesture, Amy replaced the warm blanket and poured a bucket of sweet oats in Bonnie's feed bag. She then gave her a loving slap on the rump, and began replacing the grooming tools in their rightful place.

The noise of Bonnie's contented munching and the rattling of the tools prevented Amy from hearing the sound of an automobile pulling into the drive.

With thoughts of a steaming hot shower, Amy started out the barn door. No sooner had she opened the door than she collided with a stranger.
Chapter Four

"Don't you ever look where you're going?" Marcus Thorn's deep voice added to Amy's astonishment.

Gasping for air, Amy's first instinct was to strike out at the towering giant. But as his large hands cinched around her arms, she regained her composure and stared coldly into his blank gray eyes.

"What are you doing back here so soon? No. Let me guess. You were worried about a poor little city girl trying to take care of her dear uncle's ranch. Well, I want you off this ranch immediately. I don't know what you mean coming in here after the death of my uncle and trying to take charge when he had already appointed Toby as the ranch foreman. Mr. Thorn, you're not fit to wipe your boots on Jake's land."

The sudden anger in her voice made way for the uncontrollable flow of frustrating tears now staining her flushed cheeks.

"You ungrateful—you don't know what you're saying," he hissed through clenched white teeth. "I'll give you what you really want," he jeered as he grabbed a handful of Amy's thick hair and crushed her body tightly to his taut frame.

For every move Amy made in attempt to escape his cruel intentions, she paid dearly. Marcus Thorn showed no mercy. Each time she tried to wrench herself away from him, he tortured her by tightening his grip on her hair and jerking her head backward so that she was forced to stare into his cold expressionless eyes. A cry of desperation
escaped Amy's aching throat when she realized she was about to be kissed by her brutal chastiser. Just as she felt Marcus Thorn's hot breath upon her quivering lips, the door of the barn swung open.

"Marc, darlin', whatever are you doing in this gloomy old barn when we should be home entertaining our guests?" The shrill western drawl of the approaching redhead caught both Amy and Marcus off guard, and Marcus pushed Amy away from him.

For a moment all Amy could do was stare at the beautiful woman who was standing in the barn entrance. She looked as if she had just stepped out of a current issue of *Vogue*. Her stunning red hair draped her high cheekbones and caressed her long slim neck. She surely wasn't dressed for an afternoon ride on the range, Amy thought sarcastically as her eyes traced over the older woman's elaborate apparel. Adorned in a lavender cocktail lounger and spiked heels, she posed in a dignified manner with her arms crossed. Amy noticed the sparkling-blue eyes as they stared first at Marcus and then at herself.

After an awkward silence, the newcomer was the first to speak. "What's the matter, Marc, honey, having trouble communicating with the help?" she asked through pouting red lips, then inhaled deeply on a long cigarette.

Before Marcus could answer, Amy directed the response to him. "You could say that, but Mr. Thorn is just leaving." Angrily she dug her nails into her sweaty palms.

"Are you going to allow this little stablehand to talk to you like that?" The lavender clad woman condescendingly pointed a well manicured finger in Amy's direction.
"How dare you! You ..." Amy interrupted, but her sentence was cut short by Marcus Thorn.

"Jacqueline, wait for me in the car. This matter doesn't concern you." The anger from his previous encounter with Amy still lingered in his tone.

"Whatever you say, darlin', but you'd better teach your little loft sweeper some manners," she snarled as she sashayed in the direction of the driveway.

Amy stepped forward. "And you might as well follow her," she pointed at Marcus, her snapping remark matching Jacqueline's. "I want you off this ranch by tomorrow afternoon. I'll have your office cleared in a couple of hours." She spat the words at him as she held the door for his exit.

"Why, you inconsiderate little child," he charged, grabbing her by the shoulders. Before Amy could protest, he was shaking her so hard her teeth rattled. "Maybe Jacqueline was right. Perhaps I do need to teach you some manners. If you were a man, I'd ..." he growled as he pushed her against a saddle block.

Suddenly Amy became frightened of the powerful man's irrational actions. Rage had transformed his steel-gray eyes to a deep black and his facial expressions to sculptured stone. For a moment she was deeply fearful of his threats. Then fury and hot humiliation began to flow through her veins. She stood erect with confidence, and her flashing violet eyes met his on equal terms.

"Mr. Thorn, if you don't leave immediately, I'll call the authorities," she said in a steady tone as she started walking toward the door.
The heels of his boots made a rustling sound when he turned to face the entrance. "If I didn't have a previous engagement, I'd set you straight on who gives the orders around here," he said, exhaling heavily, as he stalked past her, practically knocking her down. He paused at the entrance of the barn. "Don't push me too far; I may forget that I'm a gentleman. I'll explain to you what's going on around here when you quit acting like an angered child. But right now, I have other plans."

When Amy opened her mouth to defend herself, the barn door slammed, nearly hitting her. She jerked on the inside latch to release the bolt and started toward the driveway. But she soon realized it was impossible for her short legs to match the strides of the angry wrangler. By the time she reached the drive, a sleek Mercedes roared to life and was rolling toward the main gate.

From a distance she could see the redhead sitting close to the masculine driver. For reasons unknown to Amy, anger began to boil in her veins once again. In a blind fit of fury, she turned and raced toward the ranch house.

Once inside, Amy ignored the tantalizing odors of Martha's baking spice cakes. As she stood panting in the foyer, the thoughts of Marcus Thorn trying to take away the only thing her Uncle Jake had to give her flooded her mind. Memories began to swirl before her eyes. It seemed lately that everything she loved had been taken away from her—her parents, her fiance, and now the ranch.

"No," she thought aloud. "I'll be blasted if anyone takes this ranch away from me!"
"Amy, is that you, dear?" Martha's voice echoed from the kitchen. "I've been worrying myself sick thinking about you alone in that storm. If Toby hadn't told me you'd arrived home safe, I don't know what I would have done." This time the voice was directly in front of Amy in the foyer.

"Oh, you should have more faith in my judgments than that. Besides, I wasn't even caught in the rain," Amy answered, purposely avoiding a detailed account of her adventure on the range and in the barn.

To hide her strained emotions, Amy redirected the conversation. "Martha, do you have the keys to Mr. Thorn's office?"

"Why, whatever for, dear? I don't think Mr. Thorn would appreciate anyone going through his personal affairs."

At this point, Amy had to fight for control. So she decided to approach the situation in a firm manner even if it required having a showdown with Martha. "Oh, didn't you know that Mr. Thorn returned from the rancher's convention earlier this afternoon?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Martha replied with a hint of curiosity lingering in her voice. "But I still don't understand why you want the keys to his office. Are you up to something you shouldn't be?"

Biting back hurt and anger, Amy tried to remain calm. "First of all, Martha, I am the mistress of this ranch, and I have the right to know what is going on around here. But to keep matters civil until I find out the facts, I asked and received permission from Mr. Thorn to become familiar with the ranch's financial operations," she lied.

Martha's expression turned to concern. "Honey, you don't know what you may be in for. Won't you reconsider, just for a little while?"
Amy stood her ground and looked Martha directly in the eyes. "Really, Martha, I insist. Give me the keys to Mr. Thorn's office." Recognizing the sustained anger and authority present in Amy's request, Martha turned without a word and entered the parlor to retrieve the keys.

Amy sighed deeply as she wiped nervous perspiration from her brow and upper lip. She began to feel hurt at the idea of Martha defending Marcus, who was obviously trying to steal her inheritance.

"Well, if Martha turns against me, I'll have to let her go, too," she mumbled to herself, a stubborn streak strengthening her determination. "I intend to keep this ranch at whatever cost. But surely Martha will stand by what's right." She paused.

The shuffling sound of a slow, tired walk brought Amy's attention to Martha entering the foyer. For a brief moment their eyes met, and the message communicated was quite clear. Each seemed to be pleading—but for a different reason. Martha was the first to break the silence. "Here they are." She offered the large household key ring to Amy. "The large skeleton key opens the office," Martha conceded before she started back to her duties in the kitchen.

"Thanks, Martha," Amy murmured, accepting the keys.

Pausing at the parlor entrance, Martha warned, "I hope you know what you're doing, honey." The last syllables faded as she padded into the kitchen.

Still determined, Amy straightened her shoulders and walked down the hallway leading to Marcus Thorn's office. For the first time since she had arrived on the ranch, she felt compassion for this man.
What bothered her about this sudden change of heart was that she really didn't know why she actually felt this way. To make matters more difficult, she found herself hoping there wouldn't be any evidence of a scandal on Thorn's part. Momentarily she stooped before the office door, her hands trembling as she fumbled with the key. The key rattled noisily inside the lock as the pin released the bolt. With some confusion and much caution, Amy entered.

The room she saw was much larger than the one she had anticipated. If she remembered correctly, when Jake had used the room, it had been much smaller. The smell of fresh pine boards told her that the office, like several of the other rooms, had been renovated to suit Marcus Thorn's needs. At first she was annoyed by these changes. But as she began to scan the extensive breadth of the office, she appreciated the improvements. Muffled voices in the hallway caused Amy to return to the door and secure the lock.

Turning to face the room, she saw the contents for the first time. A large oak desk and chair occupied a corner of the spacious quarters. However, the remaining furnishings were not typical of a rancher's office. Two of the four walls were dressed with large pine shelves that housed everything from the Farmer's Almanac to a complete collection of Poe and Dickinson. Nervously Amy ran her hands along the smooth wood of the antique file cabinets standing beside the thick marble fireplace mantle. For a moment she hesitated. It was as if she had a sixth-sense---she was afraid of what she would find.

The file cabinets were her first chore. As she pored through the files, to her surprise, she found nothing even slightly scandalous.
After two hours of reading financial statements, cattle sale reports, vaccination forms, and general accounting data from the ranch's accountant, Amy started to question her previous judgments of Marcus Thorn. However, her business career had taught her to be thorough, so she proceeded to the desk.

The grandfather clock chimed seven times as Amy replaced the last document in the large desk drawer. Tension began to strain her nerves, and exhaustion began to weigh heavily on her body. Tired, she leaned against the back of the wooden desk chair and began to tap a pencil idly on the desk's smooth top. A branch scratching against the window above the desk caught Amy's attention, and the pencil dropped to the floor. As she felt for the lost pencil beneath the desk, her foot rubbed against a small metal object. To investigate further, Amy fell to her knees and crawled under the desk.

It was just as she thought. A small lever attached to a tripping device ran the full length of the back wall. She inspected the lever and noticed that it required a key. Retrieving the key ring from her hip pocket where she had placed it for safe keeping, she began to flip through the rows of keys. To her dismay, there wasn't a key that seemed small enough to fit the locked lever. Frustrated, Amy crawled from beneath the desk and began to pace nervously in front of the fireplace. A soft knock at the door broke her concentration.

"Amy, are you still in there?" Martha's voice sounded from the opposite side of the door.

"Yes, what is it?" she replied walking toward the door.
"I made you some hot chocolate."

"Uh, just a minute." She stalled while she set the desk in order.

Amy quickly turned the lock and let the elderly servant enter with a tray of hot chocolate and spice cake. "My, you didn't need to go to all that trouble, Martha," Amy said appreciatively.

"Oh, it's no bother. The truth is, honey, I needed an excuse to talk with you before matters get worse. What I mean is, I don't want the situation between you and Mr. Thorn to damage our relationship."

"But ..." Amy attempted to interrupt.

"Please let me finish," Martha insisted. "Honey, you should know after all these years that I love you as if you were my very own, and that I wouldn't intentionally hurt you in any way. I admit things seem a little strange around here now. But let them lie. I promise nobody is going to take this ranch away from you now or ever."

"Martha, please don't. I must do what I think is best for everyone concerned."

"Yes, but you don't understand. Everything that's happening right now is in the best interests of you and the ranch. Just give it a few more days. You'll see everything will work out for the best. Trust me," the older woman pleaded.

"Listen to me, Martha." Gently she grasped the shoulders of the housekeeper. "I do trust you, and I know that you're trying to protect me, but this is something that I must do. So please, if you want to support me, abide by my rules for a while," Amy said with a note of sympathy.
"Of course. I guess I'm just an overprotective mother hen."
She smiled disappointedly. "But remember if you need me, I'm only a short distance away." She turned to go, leaving Amy to finish what she had started.

"Say, Martha, you wouldn't happen to have an extra hairpin on you, would you? I haven't stopped to clean myself up after my ride, and I want to fasten this hair away from my face."

"Sure, honey." Good naturedly she plucked a large pin from her tightly wound knot at the back of her graying head.

"Thanks, you're a real trooper." Amy kissed her on the cheek. "Maybe we'll have a little talk later."

"Okay, I'll hold you to it." Martha exited smiling.

Amy closed the door softly and locked it securely. Her hands trembled as they clumsily straightened the bent hairpin. With her minor task completed, she crawled beneath the desk to finish the job.

Several minutes had gone by before the stubborn lever finally released itself with a click. A slight amount of pressure was all the lever required to make way for a small door that swung open and revealed a leather-bound file stored in the secret compartment.

Carefully she took the letter file and walked to a stuffed armchair facing the fireplace. Amy stared at the words THORN ENTERPRISES embossed across the middle of the leather case. Quickly she opened the file and began sorting through its contents. To her relief the first few items were nothing more than the usual insurance forms and savings bonds. Near the middle of the pile, she noticed two documents
in cardboard jackets and, curiously, she unfolded the first cover.

The words on the first document struck her with the force of a bolt of lightning—Last Will and Testament of Jake W. O'Rally. What was Marcus Thorn doing with a copy of her Uncle Jake's will? After scanning its contents, Amy was sure it was a legitimate copy, naming her the owner of the ranch. But how and why was a copy here? Hesitantly, she unveiled the contents of the second document.

Several minutes passed before she was able to control her numbed limbs. A garbled gasp escaped Amy's throat as she stared blankly at the bold legal print on the parched paper. She was holding what appeared to be an amended version of Jake's first will. This new version named Marcus Thorn the executor of the estate as well as the owner of the ranch. Hot tears of humiliation flowed freely upon the leather case leaving little gray spots in a speckled pattern. Angrily, she thrust the papers aside and stood peering out the window.

"So that's it!" she blurted out. "That miserable lout forged a copy of Jake's will, and he plans to claim the ranch for himself."

"Now, that's not the truth, Amy," Martha's soothing voice came to Marcus Thorn's defense.

"What! How did you get in here? No, let me guess. You're in on it, too. Is that it?" Amy swirled hysterically to face Martha.

"Stop it! I'm the housekeeper, remember? I have my own set of keys to every room in this house." Anger rose in Martha's strained voice. "Now you listen to me, young lady. I warned you. And since you're so determined to find out what's going on around here, I'm going
to tell you myself."

"It's quite clear what's going on around here. Marcus Thorn is trying to take this ranch from all of us." Amy's lips quivered.

"Now, that's not true, and I'm going to prove it to you right now. But first, you're going to sit here and relax while I fix you a drink to calm you down." Martha motioned to the armchair cluttered with the papers Amy had hastily deposited.

Amy opened her mouth in protest, but Martha counteracted.

"Honey, I really think it's better you hear this from me than from Mr. Thorn's attorneys. Now, here, drink this; it will help you to relax." She handed Amy a glass of cherry brandy.

Amy decided to accept the drink and to succumb to Martha's demands more out of shock at the whole discovery rather than in agreement with her statements concerning Marcus Thorn.

Purposefully, Martha positioned the desk chair so that Amy would be forced to face her during her explanation. "Well, I guess I'll start at the beginning," Martha said, as she sat in the wooden desk chair.

"Seems appropriate, don't you think?" Amy replied smugly.

Ignoring Amy's short remark, Martha started explaining the situation. "Well, Amy, after your Aunt Ellen passed on, Jake was left with a lot of medical bills. In fact, he took a second mortgage on the ranch to carry him through those last few months."

Amy looked at Martha with surprise. "Why didn't he say something to Dad? We would have been glad to help all we could."

"He knew that, honey, but we both know that Jake was a giver, not
a taker. Besides, he figured your parents had their hands full with both of you girls in college. Now, let me continue while I still have the courage." Martha realized that this wouldn't be easy either for her or Amy.

"Now, where did I leave off? Oh, yes. A few weeks after the funeral, the bank was threatening foreclosure, and Jake became desperate. Here's where Marcus comes into the picture."

He probably came galloping in on a white stallion like the Lone Ranger, Amy thought.

"Are you listening to me, Amy? It's very important that you understand what I'm about to tell you," Martha persisted.

"Yes, I'm listening," Amy assured her narrator.

"Marcus Thorn is one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in southern Colorado," Martha continued.

The words shocked Amy into an upright position.

"Yes, you heard me correctly. He owns an elaborate spread only a few miles from here."

"I don't understand," Amy choked.

"Well, Thorn Enterprises is a cattle breeding business, and Mr. Thorn owns and produces some of the finest stock in the entire western United States."

Still amazed at the statements that she was hearing, Amy interjected, "Just how does he fit into Jake's life?"

"Mr. Thorn's father was like a brother to Jake. Jake and Marcus were like father and son. So when Marcus found out that Jake was in trouble, he insisted that Jake accept his help. But being the stubborn
man Jake was, he insisted that Marcus accept an I.O.U. for the money. Anyway, as the months rolled by, Jake's health began to fail, and he knew he would never be able to repay the loan. In order for him to die in peace, he insisted that I call an attorney so that he could have the will amended.

"So, the ranch is really Thorn's?" Amy questioned with tears blurring her vision.

"Not exactly."

"Martha, don't play tricks with me," she begged.

"I'm not, child. I've already told you that Marcus loved Jake dearly, and he knew how much you meant to him. So after Jake passed away, Marcus, since he was the executor in the amended will, requested that the previous will be honored in your behalf."

"That was most kind of him. But I'm like my Uncle Jake. I won't accept his charity."

"Amy, you don't know how much Jake wanted you to have this place. He used to sit and dream about how perfect he intended it to be when it reached your hands. Remember how you always wanted it to be a dude-ranch so all your friends could come and stay with you in the summers. Well, he intended to do that, but as you can see, everything didn't exactly go as planned."

"Oh, Martha," Amy sobbed.

"Well, of course the decision is entirely up to you, but I want you to look over these papers while I fix us both a drink," Martha said, as she handed Amy several stapled papers.

Every legal aspect of Martha's story was staring back at her in
bold print. The I.O.U. and Marcus's declaration of property were all signed by his attorney and bore the state seal.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Martha offered Amy a fresh brandy.

"Yeah, I'm doing just fine." She sighed and swallowed the sweet liquid. "I just need some air to clear my head. Martha, I think I'm going to take a drive. I'll be back in a little while." She retreated quickly without giving Martha a chance to reply.

"Come on, baby, don't fail me when I need you the most," Amy cooed to the Suburban as it first sputtered and then roared to life. After taking a couple of deep breaths to clear her head from the effects of the brandy, she backed the vehicle carefully out of the garage. Once past the main gates, Amy pushed hard on the accelerator and turned the jeep onto the rough range. She had no idea where she was going. For the moment she knew that she must put as much space as possible between the ranch and herself. Fatigue drained her body and worry flooded her mind.

After she had driven several miles out into the deserted flatlands, she brought the jeep to an abrupt halt and turned off the engine. Several minutes passed before Amy decided to take a walk. She put on her light-weight cardigan and took the keys from the ignition.

She had forgotten how cool the nights were on the range. Her sweater offered her almost no protection from the biting breeze that flowed down from the mountains. The cold Colorado air began to shake off the effects of Martha's relaxer. Amy walked away from the jeep. "Boy, you have some luck, don't you girl," she said, feeling sorry for
herself. Everything seemed to be coming at her at the same time. Amy was absolutely astonished at the information she had just learned. It was as if she was totally alone in the world and no one cared about her or understood her situation.

From a distance the north star shone brightly through the darkened western sky. Mournful sounds of the little night creatures added to her depressed state. Just when she thought she had reached her lowest state of mind, a phrase ran through her thoughts—"pride before defeat." Amy's spirits brightened as she mused about the meaning of the quote. Before she was truly defeated she must be stripped of her pride, but pride was something that no one could take from her. It was a comfortable thought—her only one—to know that she could never really be defeated. Her keen sense of direction warned her she should turn back toward the jeep. She knew that in practically no time at all a man could be lost in the upcoming mountain passes.

During her return, a dim twinkling light told her that she had left the head lamps burning in the Suburban. Amy quickened her approach in order to salvage what little battery power was left. Her attempt to start the dying engine was useless. There wasn't enough power left to turn the starter one complete revolution. Well, she couldn't stay here. The night was getting colder, and she didn't have sufficient clothing. She might as well start walking toward the ranch. "With a little luck I can hitch a ride from one of the local ranchers," she thought hopefully.

Amy's feet began to ache, and her teeth chattered from the brisk winds that had grown more powerful in recent minutes. Each step she
took she thought would be her last. Coldness and sheer exhaustion all but conquered the muscles in her tired legs. It was then that she made a decision. As soon as she could get a flight out, she would return to New York. However, these thoughts faded when she saw the lights of an approaching vehicle.

It took every ounce of strength she could gather to flag the speeding vehicle. Every nerve in her body was relieved when she was satisfied that the driver had seen her. That is, until she noticed that the car was a black Mercedes.
Chapter Five

"Well, are you going to get in, or are you planning to give us both pneumonia?" invited a deep voice from inside the Mercedes.

Hesitantly Amy glided onto the plush front seat of the luxurious sports car and closed the door. The sudden temperature change caused her to shiver uncontrollably. Without looking at his passenger, Marcus Thorn removed his dinner jacket and offered it to Amy. She was just too tired and cold to refuse; besides, the width of the jacket made a comfortable shelter for her trembling body. Without conversation, the driver maneuvered the powerful machine onto the main highway.

Marcus Thorn was the first to break the silence. "It seems as if I'm constantly playing the knight in shining armor where you're concerned. Don't I even get a 'thank you,' fair damsel?" He exposed a half smile that touched the lines of his strong mouth.

"Oh, by all means please forgive me, sire," she snapped.

"Don't you think it's about time we call a truce?" he asked, clearing his throat uneasily. "It's obvious that we both have some mutual interests or neither of us would be here—now would we?" he added in a smooth steady tone.

"No, I guess not," she admitted. "But I'm still not sure who's my friend or my enemy around here. Surely you of all people should understand that. I mean, everything I've ever cared about has been dropped at my feet for everyone to walk over, and I'm still expected to
appreciate your so-called good intentions."

"Other than nursing a broken heart, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh come on, Mr. Thorn, don't play innocent with me. I'm sure sweet, dedicated Martha has filled you in on every minute detail. Why else would you leave your little dinner party in formal evening wear to take a drive on the range?" she said, trying hard not to admire his appearance.

"Okay. So you know the truth, but don't start coming down on Martha. She's very concerned about you, Amy, and I won't have you hurting her," he said sternly. "I knew when you went to that office you'd eventually find the letter file, but I didn't want you to find out this way. I knew you'd get your feathers ruffled and jump to the wrong conclusion."

"What did you expect me to do, come running into your arms with gratitude written all over my face?"

"That would be a pleasant start for us both, don't you think?"

Once again as she turned to face her opponent, strange sensations ran through her body and dulled her senses. "Well, I don't intend to run to you or any other man." She fought back against his sensuous suggestion. "And if you knew my uncle as well as I've been given to believe you do, then you should see that I'm a lot like him. That is, Mr. Thorn, I understand what you're trying to do, but I refuse to accept your charity. So, I've decided to return to New York at the end of the week," she said, peering through the tinted windshield.

"Oh, I see," he said, glancing at the rumpled appearance of the girl sitting beside him. "Well, I do agree with you on one matter. I did
know Jake quite well. But, you're definitely not like him."

"What makes you say that?" she asked as she turned to face him.

"That question's an easy one. Jake wasn't a quitter. Why, he always figured out a solution for all his problems. Even though things didn't always work out the way he expected them to, he went down with his ship like any good captain would."

"You mean his ship sank conveniently in your harbor, don't you, Mr. Thorn?" Amy taunted.

Marcus Thorn ignored her biting statement and continued his lecture. "Maybe New York is where you belong. It takes backbone to survive in this country."

"And you're suggesting that I don't have..." Amy remarked hotly.

"What I'm saying is if you want something bad enough, you'll work hard to get it."

"Just exactly what are you trying to get at, Mr. Thorn?" She removed the jacket as a flush of anger suddenly warmed her body.

"Why, I'm sure that Martha has already informed you by now that I'm a businessman."

"Yes, but I don't see what that has to do with my not accepting the ranch."

"Really, Miss O'Rally, it's hardly believable that you can be so naive. I guess I'll have to spell it out for you. I would be willing to accept some type of business proposition since you're so against my gracious offer," he said with sparkling highlights shining in his gray eyes.

At first, Amy was appalled at the idea, but as she thought more care-
fully, she decided to consider his challenge. After all, it was evident from his tone that he really didn't want the ranch. So this was her chance to keep what she had so long dreamed of having and to show Marcus Thorn that she had as much spunk as his little red-haired Barbie Doll.

"Okay, Mr. Thorn. What type of proposition did you have in mind?" she replied, staring at him intently.

"Before we get into business deals, I suggest we both resign to calling each other by our Christian names. Agreed?"

Amy nodded.

"You probably know that the last several months I've spent a lot of time away from my own home in order to make the necessary improvements on er ... Jake's place. Well, in doing so, I've neglected several of my civic duties to the area ranchers, and I think it's about time Thorn Enterprises begins to serve its purpose—cattle breeding," he said with enthusiasm.

"Uh, I still don't see where I fit into the picture. I'm afraid I don't know much about cattle breeding, but I do know quite a bit about running a ranch."

"Precisely." He smiled, revealing two rows of straight white teeth. "I need help running my ranch for a while—say six months or so—until I finish a very important business project," he offered, tightening his grip on the steering wheel. "What do you think, Amy?"

Amy couldn't help noticing Marcus's smooth pronunciation of her given name. She stuttered when she attempted to answer his question.

"Well ... er ... I don't know, Marcus. Exactly what kind of help do you need maintaining your ranch?"
"I need someone to run the household and to be a hostess at my dinner parties."

The words burned through her body like a hot branding iron. "In other words, you want a personal servant—someone without much backbone! Well, I'm sorry, but absolutely not, Mr. Thorn."

"Now hold on, little lady. I have all the servants I need. The house workers will take care of the cleaning, cooking, and whatever else needs to be done. As I said before, I need someone to run the household and serve as a hostess. Your duties would include such things as menu planning, preparing guest lists for dinner parties, and just making sure the servants are doing their jobs. You know, sort of like a mistress of the house when the master is away," he said, biting back a hint of sarcasm.

"Oh, I see! What you really need is someone to fulfill the duties of a wealthy rancher's wife—that is, without bedroom responsibilities, I assume," she sneered.

"Well, those could be arranged at your convenience, of course." His gray eyes challenged her.

"You're disgusting. Don't flatter yourself, Mr. Thorn."

For a moment his eyes traced the outline of her thin body. It was as if he was able to see through her thick flannel shirt and expose for his own personal pleasure the fullness of her breasts.

Shuddering, Amy reached for the jacket and covered herself. Then Marcus Thorn spoke.

"Don't worry. Your honor is perfectly safe with me. I don't find an unwilling partner much fun; besides I'm not into that sort of thing."
You know what I mean?"

"He means I'm safe as long as he has his little Madonna hanging around his neck to warn off female intruders," Amy muttered under her breath.

"What did you say?" Marcus asked, raising a thick eyebrow.

"Uh--I said I wonder who will see that O'Rally, Inc., will be taken care of."

"Don't worry about the ranch; I'll see to the running of the place. Or, better still, perhaps we could collaborate on the matter," he suggested.

"No offense Mr. Thorn ... er ... Marcus, but since I've decided to accept your business proposition and repay Jake's loan, the ranch really isn't mine until the money is paid. So as long as I have that debt hanging over my head, I'll let you tend to what is rightfully yours."

She straightened her shoulders proudly.

"My, you do have a touch of Jake's stubborn streak, don't you?" He smiled warmly. "Well, we'll deal with that later. I think we should celebrate our arrangement by getting to know each other a little better. You may be surprised to know that I'm not the outlaw you think. How about starting over dinner?"

"That's kind of you, but I'm not exactly dressed for the occasion. Look at me. I'm a mess. I've got more trail dust on me than the trail does." Amy tried to decline his invitation. "Besides, I left my handbag in the jeep. Good Lord! My jeep!" she rambled nervously.

"Whoa. Slow down. Does this belong to you?" he asked, reaching in the back seat and retrieving her purse.
"But ... how did you get this?" she stammered.

"And as far as your jeep is concerned, Toby should have it at the ranch by now, safe and sound."

"You do think of everything, don't you?"

"Just about," he said, his eyes appraising her flushed appearance.

Turning away from him, she tried to decline his invitation once more. "I really don't think my attire is appropriate for dining out."

She looked down at her flannel shirt and faded Levis regretfully.

"I agree that you don't look as if you've just finished a photo session for Glamour magazine, but where I have in mind we can get a little peace and quiet and some home cooking. Besides, don't underestimate yourself. You'd be surprised what a little soap and water from the ladies' room would do for you, Amy," he said, looking down at her with twinkling eyes.

"Well, in that case I guess I have no other choice," she chuckled as she began to relax for the first time since her arrival.

The remainder of their journey was virtually silent. It was as if both driver and passenger shared a mutual admiration for nature's way of decorating the darkened range with a backdrop of heavenly constellations. Amy sat back in her seat and drank in the majestic sights. But her immediate attention was captured by one of the most beautiful sights she had ever witnessed. The moon was a fiery yellow-orange in all its fullness, and a mist of silver-gray clouds enclosed its circumference in an illuminating frame of glistening copper. Amy was in such awe of the glorious metamorphosis that she hadn't noticed they were no longer moving.
After the clouds began to dissipate and the moon changed back to its original colors, Marcus spoke.

"There's an old Indian legend that explains what has just taken place. The story goes that on the eve of the changing moon a fair-skinned maiden will steal the heart of a great chief. Also, according to the legend, if the maiden has hair the color of the moon's copper ring, she has the spiritual blessing of the ancient Princess Tyreia. Therefore, if a pact of love is made between the maiden and the great chief, the couple will be blessed with an offspring of powerful warriors."

"What a beautiful thought. You know, it's sort of sad that the story is only an old Indian legend," Amy said dreamily as she gazed into the open sky.

"Some still believe quite religiously in the relationship between the changing of the moon and marriage," he said as his eyes met Amy's. "In fact, your hair color and complexion are a perfect match for the part of the fair maiden."

This time Amy blushed with embarrassment and turned her head toward the open range. Though marriage was far from her future plans, humor filled her voice as she turned to face Marcus. "I guess I'd better get on the ball if I'm going to find a wise old chief to fall in love with me this time of night," she giggled softly as she imagined herself walking up the church aisle accompanied by an elderly Indian chief adorned in full headdress and war paint.

"You never know," he teased. "You may not have to look very far. Besides, the legend doesn't mention the chief being old."

Before Amy could ask Marcus what he meant by his last statement,
the Mercedes was turning onto the driveway of a roadside diner.

The sound of country and western music playing softly inside the diner added a touch of harmony to the simple atmosphere. Once inside, Amy was quite surprised at what she saw. Rows of wooden tables with red-checked table cloths and chairs upholstered with matching cushions gave the room an air of hospitality. Along the wall at the rear of the room, a warm fire blazing in a large fieldstone fireplace invited the new guests.

"I think a seat by the fire is appropriate, don't you?" Marcus suggested, placing a strong arm around Amy's shoulder.

"Yes, most definitely," she agreed, trying to shake off the strange chills running the full length of her spine.

"In that case, shall we?" Marcus directed her toward a corner table.

"Why don't you freshen up while I use the pay phone outside to let Martha know you're all right," he suggested, pointing Amy in the direction of the ladies' room.

"Good idea. I won't be very long," she smiled.

Once inside the restroom, she couldn't believe her tattered appearance as she gazed into a large mirror above the sink. After locking the door, she quickly set to work. First she removed her Levis and shirt, shook them vigorously, and laid them on a vent to air. She briskly washed her body free of the day's trail dust with what sparse supplies were available. Feeling a little more alive, she rapidly unbraided her tangled hair, took her brush from her purse, and brushed her copper locks until they shone. Skillfully Amy patiently twisted
her hair into a thick and fashionable French braid that tapered the full length of her neck. As a final touch, she replaced her brush and secured a few needed cosmetics. Since her face already held a natural glow, all she needed was a few basics. Expertly she applied a thin coat of mascara to accent her deep-set violet eyes and a light pink blusher to her creamy complexion. She chose a natural gloss for her full lips and applied a light spray of perfumed fragrance to her exposed body.

"Now, that should do it," she said, gazing into the mirror. After she quickly redressed, she paused to check her appearance. Still there was that unattractive flannel shirt. Trying to be as creative as possible, she rolled the sleeves neatly and pushed them above her elbows. Next, she cinched the shirt-tail into a tight bow just along the band of her jeans. This gave an attractive effect to her already trim waist-line. Gathering her belongings, she started back to the dining area.

As Amy neared their table, it was evident that Marcus Thorn was giving her his approval. His dark eyes scanned the full length of her slim body not seeming to miss any curve or line. She tried to hide her embarrassment by thanking him politely and smiling pleasantly as he helped her into her chair. She was sure he was about to make some type of comment when the waitress approached their table.

"Why, Marcus Thorn. What gives us the pleasure of your company? It's been quite a while since I've seen you here." A pleasant female voice greeted the couple.

"Hello, Molly. You know that I can't bear staying away from you too long." The big man flattered the aging waitress. "Oh, I'd like you to
meet someone. Molly Baker, this is Amy O'Rally."

"Right pleased to meet you, honey." The older woman offered Amy a large hand in greeting. "Why, they do keep getting prettier," she said smiling. "O'Rally, huh? Why, you wouldn't happen to be Jake's niece?"

"Yes, I am." Amy smiled politely. "Did you know him?" she asked.

"I reckon 'bout everyone in these parts knew ole Jake. He sure was a good man," she said with smiling eyes. "My, you sure are a pretty little thing. If Jake was alive, he'd have to fight off all the local young cowpokes," Molly teased. "But you're safe for the time being. Ain't no man with any sense at all going to move in on a girl if he thinks Marcus Thorn's got his brand on her."

"I don't think those young cowpokes have anything to worry about, Molly," Amy said, a faint color rising in her cheeks.

"Miss O'Rally is my newly acquired business partner," Marcus added with an air of indifference. "Now, how about bringing us a couple of western omelets and a bottle of wine to wash down the trail dust," he suggested.

"Sure thing, Marcus." Molly winked at Amy before she left to turn their orders in.

Amy was quite relieved when Marcus excused himself and walked over to the bar. For the first time this evening, Amy truly noticed the change in his appearance. Trying not to stare, her eyes viewed his lean figure as he lounged casually against the bar. His change from the rugged western attire to formal dinner wear was most becoming.

She came to the conclusion that this arrogant Westerner would look hand-
some no matter what he was wearing. She smiled silently at the thought of what an odd couple they made sitting in the little cafe. Marcus, adorned in a black tuxedo minus a jacket and bow tie, and herself dressed in Levis, a flannel shirt, and riding boots.

Amy directed her gaze to the fire when Marcus returned with a bottle of wine and two glasses. "This may not be an imported champagne, but it will serve its purpose quite nicely," he said, slowly pouring the red liquid. "So, are you quite sure about accepting my offer, Amy?"

"Yes, I am, providing we both agree that this will be strictly business and not pleasure." Her eyes met his as she sipped the wine.

Marcus immediately read the irony in her tone and bit down hard on his lower lip before he spoke. "Don't worry yourself. I don't mix business with my personal life. I usually get what I want. So if I change my mind as far as you're concerned, you'll be the first to know. Now, do we understand each other?"

"Yes, Mr. Thorn, I believe we do. Oh, here's our food." Amy was relieved to have a reason for changing the subject of the touchy conversation.

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Thorn?" Molly asked as she set their hot omelets onto the table.

"No, thank you, Molly, everything looks fine," he said, smiling at the pleasant waitress.

"Mmm. This omelet is delicious," Amy commented after a bite of the spicy egg mixture.

"Yes, it is," Marcus agreed. "Molly makes the best western omelets in the valley. How's the wine?"
"It's quite good. Is it bottled near here?"

"Yes, in fact it is. It comes from my own personal vintage."

"I didn't know you owned a winery."

"I don't, actually. It's sort of a hobby of mine. I own a small vineyard near my ranch that I use for my stock, some of which Molly keeps on hand for me when I eat here."

"My, you're a man of many talents."

"Well, thank you ... I think. I'm not accustomed to kind comments coming from you, Amy."

"I'm not as bad as I may sound. But I suppose I do get a little carried away sometimes."

"On that point I will agree with you, Miss O'Rally." He smiled across the table, raising his wine glass to hers.

Just as Amy started to speak, the cafe doors opened, and two loud voices filled the entire room. She turned toward the boisterous sounds and couldn't believe what she saw. Jacqueline and a young man were walking through the door. Amy was well aware that Marcus had noticed the newcomers when he began to shuffle his feet beneath the table.

"Here comes trouble," Amy mumbled as she concentrated on her half-eaten omelet. She tried to chew her food, but the sound of feet walking over the rough board floor in the direction of their table made it impossible. Before Jacqueline spoke, Amy was aware of her presence. The smell of strong French perfume nearly caused her eyes to water.

"Marc, imagine meeting you here!" Jacqueline's shrill voice cut through the warm atmosphere in the little cafe like a gust of biting wind. "Oh, I see why you left our dinner party so suddenly. And
naturally I understand why you wouldn't want to eat at a more elegant restaurant," she said, her eyes raking Amy's appearance with cold disapproval.

"Good evening, Jacqueline. What brings you so far away from your usual nightspots?" Marcus asked in a steady voice.

"Oh, I thought I'd try to see just what you always saw in a little place like this. Really, darlin', I just don't see what a dingy old cafe in the middle of nowhere has to offer you," she said through pouting lips.

"No, I didn't expect you would," he said, bitterness creeping into his tone. "Who's your shadow?" Marcus asked, referring to the young man standing in Jacqueline's background.

"Oh, forgive me, Marc, honey. This is Jeff Dickerson, an interested business investor." The tall blond stepped forward and offered his hand in greeting, but Marcus ignored the gesture.

Jeff turned away from Marcus and directed his attention to Amy. "How about the little lady. Don't I get an introduction?" he asked, admiring her.

Marcus Thorn cleared his throat and casually made the necessary introductions. "This is Amy O'Rally."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Dickerson," Amy answered politely, as she extended her hand nervously.

Instead of accepting in a shake, he touched her fingertips to his lips. "I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Miss O'Rally," he replied, repeating the kiss.

Amy quickly withdrew her hand, nodded shyly, and glanced at Jacqueline.
Amy knew that Jacqueline had followed Marcus here, but she couldn't understand why she had brought Jeff along. For a moment the two young women stared at each other, battling silently between themselves. But Jacqueline was the first to break the silence.

"Miss O'Rally is a stable worker at Marcus's new ranch," she said, looking at Jeff sweetly.

All Amy could do was sit there. She hadn't been so angry at and humiliated by another female in her entire life. She wanted to reach out and scratch Jacqueline's eyes out. Her ordeal earlier that evening, the wine, a sense of civility, however, all combined to keep her temper in check. Marcus sensed her desperation and quickly came to her defense.

"Excuse me, Jacqueline, I believe you have it all wrong. Miss O'Rally is my dinner date and my business partner."

Jacqueline laughed sarcastically. "Really, Marcus, you are getting senile in your old age. But you were always the type to take strays under your wing. But don't you think that this one is a little too young to leave the nest? Well, I see there's no room here at your little table for two, so we'll just mosey along and let you talk about cattle reproduction, or whatever it is that you do talk about. We'll talk later, darlin'," she said as she lit a long cigarette and blew a kiss in Marcus's direction.

Marcus rose from his chair and glared down at Jacqueline. I think that's a good idea. I'll talk to you later," he said, anger rising in his voice.

Before she left, Jacqueline stopped and peered through long lashes at Amy. "Miss O'Rally, if you plan to fit into Marcus's circle, you
really must do something about your dreadful wardrobe. Perhaps I'll have the time to give you some pointers."

This time Amy was able to speak. "No, thank you, Jacqueline. Melodramatic really isn't my style, but thank you anyway," she said, referring to Jacqueline's hot-pink slacks and pink cashmere sweater. Though Jacqueline was a beautiful woman, her gaudy choice of clothes and her over-use of makeup gave her a cheap show-girl appearance.

The older woman paused for a moment then shook her head indifferently. With a final wave to Amy and Marcus, Jacqueline gave her hand to Jeff and walked to a table on the other side of the room.

"The nerve of that woman. I'd like to ..." Amy said aloud, throwing her napkin onto her half-eaten dinner.

"Hey, tiger, pull in your claws and let's finish what we came here to do--relax. I promise you you'll not be having any trouble from her in the future."

"I surely hope not. I don't think I'd be responsible for my actions if we were to get into it again," she said, running her hands over her thick braid.

"Would you like some more wine?" asked Marcus apologetically.

"Yes, please; my throat's suddenly dry."

For the next few minutes, Amy sipped her wine and allowed herself to be caught up in the soft music, the warm fire, and the presence of Marcus Thorn.

"Would you like to dance?" Marcus's soft deep voice brought her back down to earth.

"Sure. Why not?" she heard herself say much too eagerly.
Several couples including Jacqueline and Jeff were swaying to the soft rhythm of the country and western music. Marcus maneuvered Amy professionally to the center of the dance floor, purposely avoiding Jeff and Jacqueline.

"Do I frighten you?" Marcus whispered softly into Amy's hair.

"Of course not. What makes you ask such a question," she said, avoiding direct eye contact. The truth was she was having trouble focusing, and she didn't want Marcus to know that she couldn't drink half a bottle of wine without being tipsy.

"Well, I was thinking that you were either a poor dancer or you were afraid of me because there's enough room between us for another person," he said smiling. "Come on, relax! I won't bite." And he gently pulled her closer to his swaying body.

"I'm not so sure of that," she said under her breath. However, she did relax and found herself almost clinging to him as each tune melted into another. In fact, she found herself enjoying their swaying embrace a little too much. As she began to relax, she laid her head on the center of his hard chest, and placed her hands on his shoulders. She could feel the quickening of her own heartbeat as she felt the flowing movement of his breathing. Marcus also seemed to enjoy their closeness. He tightened his embrace and laid his head gently against her temple. Her pulse quickened when she felt his warm breath exhaling in her right ear. They held this position for what seemed to Amy minutes.

After several dances, Marcus suggested they take a break. Amy agreed. She felt she needed a cool drink to bring her back to her senses. En route she was stopped by Jeff.
"May I have this dance, gorgeous?" he said, flirting openly.

"No, I don't think so. We were just going to get something to drink." She turned to discover that Marcus was no longer at her side. Instead, he was talking with Jacqueline at her table.

"Ah, come on, doll. It's obvious we're not in their league. Besides, you need a younger man to show you the ropes," he said, grabbing her arm.

Amy smelled the liquor on his breath. And, in order not to upset him in his present intoxicated state, she concluded that one dance wouldn't matter.

Once back on the dance floor, she realized she had made a mistake. Jeff wouldn't keep his hands off her. At first she tried to loosen his grip around her waist, but he pulled her closer. So she tried to talk herself out of her predicament.

"Mr. Dickerson, please. We hardly know each other," she pleaded, as he began kissing her neck.

"Now, come on, honey. How long have you known your millionaire over there? I'm sure you'd invite him to do more than to warm you up a little," he said as he forced his lips down on hers.

Amy bit down on his lip hard, and abruptly pushed him away from her with all her energy and started back to her table.

"Why, you little tramp!" Jeff yelled, grabbing the back of her shirt and nearly ripping it off.

"That's enough, Dickerson," Marcus Thorn raged as he roughly pushed Amy aside, grabbed Jeff by the collar, and punched him squarely on the chin. Both Amy and Jeff hit the hard floor at the same time, but
it was Jeff who was the slower to get up. Marcus turned to see if Amy was all right and Jeff grabbed a chair. Amy was speechless. She tried to warn Marcus, but her lips were frozen.

It was Molly who warned him. "Marcus, look behind you!" she said in a frightened tone.

Marcus thrust forward his arms and blocked the oncoming chair. Catching the weapon in two strong fists, he first turned it on his partner. "Damn it, Dickerson, I don't fight dirty," he said, throwing it in a corner next to him. This time the younger man lunged at Marcus and caught him off balance. Both men went down. For a second Amy couldn't tell which man was on top. Finally she found words.

"Stop it! Stop them, Molly! They'll kill each other!" she cried, trying to get away from Molly's hold.

"Don't worry yourself, child. I'll bet Marcus Thorn can take care of himself."

Seconds later, Marcus was the first man to stand. Amy looked first at Marcus and then at Jeff who was lying out-cold on the floor. It was a miracle that Marcus didn't look as if he'd been in a fight. Other than breathing a little heavily and having a ruffled appearance accompanied by a robust glow, he didn't have a mark on him.

Meanwhile, Amy had noticed Jacqueline standing in a corner with her arms crossed and smiling wickedly throughout the entire fight. And of course it was a sympathetic Jacqueline who ran to Jeff's wounded side.

"Is he still breathing?" she asked Marcus.

"Sure, just pour a little water on his head and take him home. He'll be just fine. Especially with you for a nurse," Marcus added
sarcastically. "Molly, I'm sorry about wrecking your place. Just
send me a bill for damages, and I'll take care of it."

"Now, don't you worry about it, Marcus," Molly said. "He needed
to be taken down a peg or two."

"How about you, Amy? Are you all right?" He placed a strong arm
around her shoulder and checked her appearance for obvious bruises.

"I'm fine. I'm getting used to running into an occasional brick
call," she said, smiling up at him. "What about you? Will you survive?"

"Sure. A hot shower and I'll feel like a new person."

"Me, too," Amy agreed.

"Are you ready to head home before we get ourselves into any more
trouble?"

"I think I've had my share of trouble for quite some time," she
replied, accepting his arm as he escorted her toward their parked car.

Amy was too busy listening to Marcus Thorn's inviting conversation
to hear a furious redhead swear revenge at the opposite end of the
little cafe.
Chapter Six

"That wine must have really dulled my senses," Amy moaned as she sank deep into the porcelain bathtub. Raising her hands to her throbbing temples, she blushed angrily when she began to recall some of the previous evening's events. Perhaps it was only a crazy dream. The freshness of the lavender suds and the deep pool of warm water that covered her aching body slowly revived her memory.

Was it possible she could have been senseless enough to befriend Marcus Thorn as quickly as she had become his enemy? "Girl, you sure do get yourself into some predicaments," she said aloud. "Well I guess I'll have to find a way to bow out of this one. If ..." A knock at the door stopped her from continuing.

"Amy, are you all right? Who are you talking to in there?" Martha's soft voice seemed a bellow to her aching head.

"I'm fine, I'm just talking to myself," Amy managed to say concealing her agony.

"Well now, young lady, you sure don't sound all right. Here, I've brought you a quick remedy." This time the motherly housekeeper was standing directly over her holding a large glass of something with a strange smell.

"What is this stuff? No, thanks, Martha. I think I'll resign myself to my sufferings." Amy waved her hand at the hangover antidote.

"That's ridiculous. I've never known a little tobasco sauce to harm
anyone." She pushed the glass closer.

Pausing uncertainly and looking into Martha's pleading eyes, Amy thought, "I must be going soft," and reached for the foaming glass. "I hope you know what you've just said." She coughed after finishing the bitter drink.

"Now, you should be as good as new in no time at all."

"If I don't die first," Amy muttered.

"I've brought you some toast and coffee. Once you get something on your stomach, you'll begin to feel better even faster."

Although the very thought of food made her nauseated, Amy found herself obeying rather than resigning herself to hurting the older woman's feelings. "Okay, why don't you get everything set up and I'll meet you on the veranda."

Slowly Amy reached for a towel and began to dry herself. She was once again reminded of her hangover when she stood and started toward the bedroom. Trying to ignore the dull pain in her head and a light dizzy feeling that controlled her balance when she focused on any one object for more than a few seconds, she sat down on the edge of the bed.

Sighing deeply Amy walked over to the bureau in search of something comfortable to wear. Since she planned to do nothing more productive than packing her belongings, she decided upon a pair of white jeans and a pale rose sweatshirt. Before she left the bedroom, she checked her appearance in the large oval mirror. Even though a restless night and a morning hangover had left tinted lines beneath her eyes, Amy was still a perfect picture of blossoming beauty. Her paleness gave her skin a
creamy smoothness when off-set against the pink sweatshirt. The dark damp curls that framed her youthful face and the tight clinging jeans along with the loose-fit of the sweatshirt gave her the look of a care-free teenager. Satisfied with what she saw, Amy chose a pair of sneakers and joined Martha on the veranda.

Fresh air instantly did wonders for her queasy stomach. The fragrance of early autumn flowers hung delicately in the valley and restored her calm. Though the distant mountains were capped with layers of snow and ice, the lowlands were warmed by a gentle breeze. Inhaling the vitalizing air, Amy joined Martha at the small but cozy breakfast table.

"I told you that the tobasco sauce would work miracles." Martha gave her approval of Amy's almost vibrant appearance.

"Looks can be deceiving." The dull pain in Amy's head still reminded her of her rendezvous last evening.

"Nonsense, you look radiant. Now eat up. I hope you're fond of cold toast. I tried to keep it warm, but I'm afraid it isn't going to be very tasty."

"Oh, I don't mind. I'm really not very hungry anyway." Amy nibbled like a child on the dry toast. "Besides, the coffee is absolutely marvelous."

"Why, thanks, honey, I'm glad you like it." Martha responded all too eagerly.

"All right, Martha, what's up?" Curiosity made light electric signals flash in Amy's eyes.

"I ... I don't know what you mean," she answered nervously.

"I think you know what I mean. You've seemed a bit on edge
this morning. What's bothering you?"

"Well, I don't mean to pry, but is it true?"

"Is what true? Martha, you're acting like an anxious child."

"Well, I didn't mean to eavesdrop last night, but I couldn't help overhearing you and Mr. Thorn talking about some sort of business arrangement. Anyway, I thought I heard you say that you'd be packed and ready to leave by this evening."

"Did you have to remind me of that before I've had my morning coffee?" Amy moaned and reached for her cup.

"What's wrong? Have you changed your mind? Besides, what kind of business do you have with Mr. Thorn anyway? I didn't think you two were even on speaking terms." Martha looked somewhat puzzled.

"Oh ... everything seems so hopeless." Amy stirred restlessly and looked about the room like a trapped animal.

"If you want to talk about it—it might help," Martha suggested, hoping to brighten the conversation.

Why not? You'll find out eventually anyway. Well, you know after I found out the truth about the ranch last night, I wanted to get away and think things out for myself. Well, things didn't exactly happen as I planned. I was taking a walk on the range, and Marcus just happened to come to my rescue when my jeep wouldn't start. Anyway, we took a little drive and came to terms with each other.

"I don't understand ..."

"There's not much to understand. After I met Marcus, we decided that it was time we reached some type of agreement where the ranch was concerned. So before I realized what I was saying, I found myself agreeing
to go to work for him, and in return I'd be working off Jake's debt."

"So I take it that you're not going back to New York any time soon. I'm glad you've decided to stay and work everything out."

It was obvious that Amy was having a difficult time facing up to the situation, but Martha couldn't help feel a flush of pride at her choice.

"You know, honey, I don't know how many times I've said this, but I'm going to say it again. You belong here. It's in your blood, and I don't want to see you throw away something that seems so right."

"You're right you know, Martha, I never thought I'd ever admit it, but I'm afraid that I've lost the war. I don't really have a choice. Besides, I don't actually have another place to go—and what makes it so difficult is that I'm not sure I want to be anywhere else."

Again Martha smiled and gave Amy a reassuring pat on the back. "Chin up. I think you've already taken the most important step. Now all you have to do is wait for the minor details to fall in place—and they will, you know."

"I hope you're right; I've never liked an open ended story." Amy forced a faint smile.

"Enough of this small talk, when are you supposed to leave?" Martha sniffed, trying to hide a surge of emotion. This very moment Martha saw a totally different young woman than she had only a few days before. Though she was still high spirited, Amy had shown her maturity by deciding to go to work for Marcus Thorn. She only hoped that Amy's stay on his ranch would provide the solution to the problem of the ownership battle for O'Rally Inc.
"I'm leaving this evening sometime. Why?" Amy's answer interrupted Martha's thoughts.

"Well, if you're going to move into your new home today, you'd best start packing."

"Hey, wait a minute, you're not going to get rid of me that fast," Amy teased. "I'm not going to live there permanently. I will be home on weekends with you and the boys."

"Of course, you will, but I just wanted you to pack everything that you'll need. I mean, if you wait till the last minute you may forget the absolute necessities."

"Okay, I promise I won't forget my toothbrush." A genuine smile brightened Amy's delicate features.

"I'm going to tend to some chores. When you finish your breakfast, why don't you call me and I'll help you pack? That is, someone has to make sure you don't forget your toothbrush." Martha teased back as she cleared the breakfast dishes.

Amy was scarcely aware of Martha leaving the veranda. Her desperate need to clear her thoughts of the night before left her in a melancholy solitude. Absently, she gazed around the ranch and was immediately engulfed in the scenic beauty. The same view she had witnessed earlier held an entirely different meaning for her now. The distant glacial covered mountains represented the cold and rugged side of life—the turmoil one must experience in order to reach adult maturity and power. Whereas the warm colorful valley of green, oranges and browns, and the essence of life scurrying about the rolling plains and vibrant pasturelands portrayed a certain civility—a solitude which Amy was beginning
to understand.

Suddenly she became aware that the simple things in life should be what matter, not the material and worldly struggle for power.

After all, wasn't that what she was trying to do—climb those glacial monsters and plant her flag first so she would be successful in the battle for power and recognition? No, she wouldn't do it. She'd remain in the valley and enjoy its simple pleasures. Anyway, what better way to grow and understand life than to be closest to it?

At this point Amy began to understand some of her Uncle Jake's philosophies. Throughout her adolescent years he had insisted that she, like himself, was a part of the land. And now she was beginning to see some of the truths. After only a few weeks, New York seemed like a vague dream—one that was a cold and darkened blot on her past. She now realized her need for this rugged country was more than just her love for the open range. It was a desire to find her identity—the heritage that she had left behind as a child. And, no matter what the cost, she knew that she must find it.

"Come down to Earth," Martha said, walking over to the table.

"What ... oh, I'm sorry, I didn't hear you coming."

"Mr. Thorn just called, and there seems to be a slight change of plans."

"You mean he's changed his mind?" Amy hoped.

"Hardly. He wants you to come earlier."

"How early?"

"This afternoon."

"That's impossible! This evening is fine. I haven't packed a thing."
When did he say he'd be here?"

"Oh, Mr. Thorn isn't coming himself. He's sending a car for you in an hour or so." Martha studied Amy's confused expression.

"That's thoughtful of him." Amy's pouting face belied her words.

Despite an attempt to fight her emotions, Amy found herself being somewhat disappointed. Quickly she tried to analyze these strange feelings. Could these constant disappointments when she couldn't see Marcus, and the strange sensations she felt when she was around him be early warning signs? Of what, love? Could she be falling in love with this arrogant man? Of course not. But, until now, the mere thought of loving another man hadn't crossed her mind.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Er ... sure, why?" Amy gave Martha a blank look.

"You seem as though you're in another world. Have you heard anything I've said?"

"I'm sorry, I guess I'm just not awake yet, that's all."

"Well, I've brought you the rest of the coffee. You sit here and finish up while I put the kitchen in order so we can get you packed and ready to go. But we'll have to hurry, you know."

"Thanks, and don't worry. As soon as you've finished we'll get everything ready before you know it." Amy brightened.

"You know, I love you as if you were my own," Martha added, as she left for the kitchen.

"And I love you, too," Amy whispered beneath her breath.

But there was another type of love that she had to learn to deal with. After Scott betrayed her, she had made a silent vow never to
love again. In fact, it was so secretive that she had never admitted it to anyone—not even to herself. And now she understood. Even though she had insisted on hiding her feelings for Marcus with a disguise of bitterness and hate, she knew she couldn't keep hiding her feelings from herself. Still there was one question that Amy couldn't answer. How could something that should be so right seem to be so wrong? Her only logical answer was that she just didn't love him. The idea was absolutely out of the question. She silently dismissed the thought and directed her attention to Martha, who was opening the door onto the veranda.

"Well, I guess we'd better get started if I'm going to be ready when the car arrives." Amy faked an eager reaction.

Suddenly Martha realized how difficult the pressing situation must be for Amy. It nearly broke her heart to see her suffer this way. No matter how much she wanted Amy to stay and run the ranch, and no matter how much she'd like to see her and Marcus united, she wasn't going to stand by and see Jake's niece hurt like this, even if she had to tell Marcus how she felt. For the last thing she wanted was to see that conniving Jacqueline become mistress of O'Rally Inc., and drop in her kitchen with those so-called social sophisticates demanding champagne and caviar.

"Amy, are you sure you want to do this? I mean there may be some other way of solving this problem," Martha said, trying to lighten her spirits.

Amy turned toward Martha and gazed into her watery eyes. "Yes, I'm sure. I'm afraid there isn't another way. You see it's either this,
or lose the ranch completely. And I'm not about to accept it as a gift."

"But ..."

"Hey, what's all the fuss about? You don't see me crying, do you? "I'm a big girl now, and if I see that I'm getting in over my head, I'll fade quietly into the sunset."

"That's my girl. No matter what the problem, you always did find a place for humor."

"I know. But I'm just trying to look on the bright side for a change. What've I got to lose? I'll still have my pride, and with that I'll never lose the battle."

"You sound just like your Uncle Jake."

"I guess he taught me more about life than I'll ever realize."

Afraid that Martha was going to get emotional, Amy changed the subject.

"Come on, Martha, if I'm going to win the war, I can't go to battle without suitable artillery, can I?"

"In that case, I think not." Martha forced a smile.

"All right then, let's get started. Oh, by the way, don't forget my toothbrush." Amy giggled, leading the way into the bedroom.

Forgetting her hangover entirely, Amy concentrated on keeping her departure as pleasant as possible. For the next half hour the two women put aside their problems and applied themselves to the task of packing. First, sufficient underclothing was folded and placed neatly on the bed. Amy chose only the simplest of her nightgowns, for she wasn't about to take chances in being caught in some of her sheer French
negligees. Next, an ample supply of Levis, shirts, slacks, and sweaters were chosen and put aside. Finally, she faced the choice of evening wear. In her hasty retreat from New York, the thought of formal dinner parties was the farthest thing from her mind. She had been going back to the simple life, and that was what she had prepared herself for.

"What's wrong, honey?" Martha noticed Amy standing idly in front of the closet.

"Well, I'm afraid my entertaining trousseau is quite limited."

"Don't worry, I'm sure what you have will do quite nicely. Besides, that'll give you a good reason to get out of the valley and go into town to do some serious shopping."

"I guess so," Amy said hesitantly. She wasn't about to go into detail about her limited finances.

She wasn't sure how limited her wardrobe was until she began to sort through her dresses. With Martha's help she chose what she thought would be the most appropriate for her new duties. A winter green chiffon, a blue knit, and a rose satin were the first to be placed on the growing pile of garments. Later she added several colorful shifts and a fashionable tweed suit to the collection.

"Well, I guess that leaves shoes, jewelry, and some accessories." Amy smiled, reaching for the beige leather shoe bag hanging on the inner closet door. While Amy was selecting her most prized jewelry and a beautiful lace shawl, Martha started packing the clothes in her large leather suitcases.

After placing the last of her things in an overnight case, Amy
turned to survey their completed task. "Whew. I can't believe we're finally finished." Amy sighed and sat back on one of the over-stuffed suitcases.

"Not quite," Martha echoed from the adjoining bathroom.

"What next?" Amy moaned.

"What else but your toothbrush?"

"I mustn't forget that." Amy laughed at Martha's lightheartedness.

The blast of a car horn sounded through the opened doors leading onto the veranda.

"What in the ..." Martha gasped in surprise.

"I'll go see who it is. You stay put." Amy walked quickly onto the veranda and leaned against the sturdy railing. From the look of the fully loaded pick-up and the tattered appearance of the approaching cowboy, Amy guessed him to be another drifter looking for work.

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?"

For an instant the weathered figure was confused about where the voice was coming from.

"Up here on the veranda," Amy directed him.

"Oh, afternoon, mam," he said neutrally. "I'm looking for Miss Amy O'Rally."

Well you've found her." But, if it's a job you want to see me about, I'm afraid I can't help you."

For a moment Amy could have sworn she had insulted him.

The stranger casually removed his hat revealing a sun-hardened complexion and a balding reddish-gray head. Almost rudely he switched
an obvious wad of tobacco to the opposite cheek and spat a streak of brown juice onto the dry ground.

"I ain't looking for no job, Miss O'Rally. I'm here to take you to Mr. Thorn's place."

"But I don't understand. I was under the impression Mr. Thorn was sending a chauffeur."

"Well, that's between you and him. It ain't no concern of mine."

"But you don't expect me to ride in that ... jalopy, do you?"

"Suit yourself. But this is all there is." He turned and walked absently toward the truck.

"Wait. All right, you win. Will you at least give me a hand with my luggage?"

"I ain't no taxi driver, mam. I'm just here to give you a lift," he grumbled, leaning against the passenger side of the vehicle, folding his arms indifferently.

"Damn them!" She silently cursed both Marcus and his insubordinate ranchworker.

"I'll be right there!" she snapped and turned angrily toward the bedroom.

"The very nerve of that man ..."

"Oh, that's just old Samson; his bark is bigger than his bite," Martha said, misinterpreting to whom Amy was referring.

"Just who is this Samson person anyway?"

"He's just a fence and range worker who believes hard work is the only way of life."

"Well, if you ask me, he's a rude yahoo who needs to learn some
manners," she muttered as she tugged at the heavy luggage.

"Now, he's not all bad. He's not used to doing anything other than working out on the range. You two just need a chance to get acquainted. You'll see."

"Frankly, I don't think I want that chance ..."

"Here, let me help you," Martha interjected.

"But ..." Amy tried again.

"I know it's hard, but don't fret. You do want to start off on the right foot, don't you?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right as usual," Amy sighed, trying to contain her anger.

Without any help from Samson, Amy and Martha loaded the luggage in the back of the pick-up. After the last piece was secured, Amy turned to bid Martha good-bye.

"Now don't you worry about a thing, me and the boys will take care of this place. And don't you forget why you're doing this."

Amy forced a smile to keep back the tears and gave Martha a warm hug before the older woman turned toward the house. She watched the plump and slightly bent figure until she closed the front door behind her.

"Have you changed your mind about going? If not, get in. I ain't got all day."

Amy turned and glared into the cold eyes of the driver and reached for the door handle on the passenger's side.

"Don't work. You'll have to ride in the back."
"Of course! How thoughtless of me to forget that the chauffeur always rides alone in the front seat," she snapped and stomped to the back of the truck.

"One thing for sure—if this is Thorn's idea of a joke, we'll see who'll laugh last," Amy promised herself while settling between an empty chicken coop and a suitcase.

She barely had a stable position when the pick-up rattled to life. From the manner she was tossed about, just leaving the main drive, she knew she wasn't in for a luxury ride. Already she was perspiring dreadfully from the afternoon sun. And she was afraid to even think what those rays would do to her fair skin.

"At least I won't have to make conversation with Samson," she said under her breath, trying to make the best of her situation. Even though it was impossible for her to maintain any certain position, she managed, between jolts, to retrieve a couple pieces of luggage just before they flew out of the truck. It seemed forever before she was able to place the suitcases in an upright position. With her task completed, she settled herself in the make-shift chair, leaned back, and wiped the perspiration from her face and the back of her neck.

The transition from the rough range to the main route was miraculous. Unlike the valley, the mountain highway offered a welcomed shade cast by the huge evergreens that guarded the road from the full impact of the heavy winter snows. Amy blinked away some of the trail dust and relaxed against the back of the truck. Lazily she looked around at the magnificent Rocky Mountains. This was one of the reasons she had always loved Snow Valley. At this particular elevation, the
mountains, of course, seemed much larger, but they also held an air of mystery and romance. She imagined herself hiking with Marcus through the dark forests and the natural caverns.

When the truck reached the peak of the mountain road, Amy noticed she was surrounded by a canopy of gray mist. A soft veil of fog gently concealed the mountains' most delicate features like the veils worn by ancient Arab maidens. Rocky Mountains seemed such a rough name for these natural figures of sculptured art. Amy knew that for years to come some of the most remote areas that man hadn't attempted to explore would always remain untouched and pure. Perhaps, she thought, the Virgin Mountains would be a more appropriate name.

The truck rattled and sputtered during its descent along the steep mountain highway. In the valley below, Amy could distantly see the beginning boundaries of the Circle T Ranch. Even though the west boundaries bordered with O'Rally Inc., the Circle T extended for nearly five thousand acres. Because the Circle T was the number-one cattle breeding ranch in the state, Amy was hardly surprised at the vast acreage of fertile pasturelands. As far as she could see, small rolling hills covered the land like a plush green carpet—stopping only to allow passage by several streams which carried an ample water supply to the grazing herds. Though they were still quite a distance from the ranch entrance, Amy could identify several breeds of prime livestock standing idle and enjoying their catered surroundings. Groups of Angus, Hereford, Charolais, and even the immaculate Limousine bloodline stood proudly along the fence lines of the Thorn estate.

A sudden sharp turn onto the gravel road leading to the main drive
caught Amy totally off balance and sent her sprawling across the cluttered bed of the truck. Once the vehicle steadied to one certain direction, she found herself tunneling through a blanket of chicken feathers and damp straw.

"Damn!" she choked, gasping for fresh air. "Stop the truck, will you?" she shrieked at Samson, who either didn't hear her call, or ignored the entire situation. Of course she chose to believe the latter. Angrily she pounded both fists against the cab and threw an empty chicken coop overboard. For a moment she thought she caught a glimpse of Samson smirking in the side mirror, which added to her disgust.

"Oh, Lord, I'm a mess!" she moaned, picking stray pieces of straw from her tangled hair. "I smell like a chicken farm." Amy looked at her soiled jeans and shirt, and tears of frustration began to pour down her cheeks leaving white trails against her dust-covered face.

However, Amy soon discovered she didn't have time to worry about her appearance. The gravel road had turned into a paved drive, and the Circle T became visible for the first time. She was astonished. This couldn't be the right place. Amy was about to yell for Samson when they passed beneath a large wooden arch with the ranch's emblem burned in the thick wood. She didn't have to be familiar with the estate itself to know that she was at the right place—the deep circle with a braised "T" embedded in the center signified they had reached their destination.

Momentarily the truck paused at an iron gate for admittance to the sprawling grounds. By this time, the main house was in full view. It bore little resemblance to a western ranch. The lavish structure was
a combination of the 19th-century Spanish hacienda and the Spanish villa. It consisted of various levels of stark white Spanish and Indian brick. Arcs and balconies decorated with wrought iron added wealth and power to the massive estate. Despite its elaborate construction, Arny felt an air of warmth and peace here. Though a large iron fence surrounded the house and a huge marble fountain guarded the main entrance, there was a touch of natural beauty about the place. Beautiful ferns and carpets of Spanish moss flourished in the autumn sun. One of the most gorgeous flower gardens Arny had ever seen occupied the entire east section of the courtyard. But what seemed strange to her was the presence of Indian decor mixed carefully with the Spanish architecture.

When the truck pulled into the main circle, Samson transformed into a different person. Before Arny could even collect herself, he appeared at the back of the truck to offer his assistance. And, his once rude western drawl had toned down to a polite and almost shy monotone.

Amy thought this sudden change was brought about because Samson was afraid of losing his job. Nevertheless, she still reminded herself to speak to Marcus about his cruel behavior.

"Well, here we are, mam. Let me help you down from there." His pale blue eyes flashed at her.

For a moment Arny felt a pang of anger, but as she searched his face for a look of sarcasm and found none, she stood spellbound.

"I s'pose you must be a little stiff from the ride, but I'm sure you'll find it quite suitable to your tastes inside."

"I'm quite sure I will! Thank you," she snapped. "Well, two could play his little game. If he thinks I'm a fortune hunter who is addicted
to this type of environment, then that's just what I'll give him," she thought as she offered her hand for his assistance.

"Oh, by the way, would you please be careful with my luggage? It contains several valuable garments." She motioned vaguely to the scattered suitcases in the back of the truck.

Amy could have sworn she heard Samson mutter something sarcastic when she turned and walked toward the house.

During her walk through the main grounds, Amy was able to get a closer look at the immaculate landscape. She was right. She had spotted a mixture of Indian architecture here. When she entered the courtyard, she discovered the fountain was sculptured from turquoise rather than the blue marble she had first guessed. That must have cost a small fortune, she thought as she walked onto the adobe patio. "What an odd but perfect combination," she muttered, admiring the white Spanish brick against the rusty-brown adobe.

Just as she reached for the large brass door knocker, she found herself facing a friendly looking Indian woman.

For a moment the other woman didn't speak a word. As a matter of fact, Amy half expected her to burst out laughing at any time. Then she realized what the Indian found so amusing. What a fool she was. She'd been so caught up in her new surroundings, she'd totally forgotten about her wild appearance. Hot floods of embarrassment reddened her body. All she could do was stand there at the mercy of a total stranger.

"Er ... excuse me. I'm Amy O'Rally." The maid continued to stare, and a broad smile stretched across her brown face.

"Un momento por favor ..." She started to close the door.
"Wait ... uh, you don't understand. I'm going to begin working with Mr. Thorn."

"Un momento por favor," the maid insisted, still smiling broadly.

Before Amy could stop her, the Indian closed the door in her face. "Ooh!" she hissed, and leaned against the closed door. "Well, girl, here you are looking like a bag lady from the New York ghetto, standing in the middle of a Spanish fortress trying to communicate with a Spanish speaking Indian," Amy giggled, on the verge of hysteria. If Stacey and Karen could see her now, they'd swear she'd had a little too much of the mountain air. One thing was for sure, she had come this far and she wasn't about to turn back now, she thought, straightening her shoulders.

Just as she reached once more for the brass door knocker, the door swung open, and she nearly tripped over the doorman into the foyer.

"My, must you always make such a grand entrance?"

Amy knew she needn't look up and match the deep voice with the strong arm that was supporting her waist. Once again her body burned with embarrassment when her eyes met Marcus Thorn's.

"I'm glad to see you're prepared for hard work, but I hardly intended for you to clean my barns," he smiled, looking down at her with laughing eyes.

"No? Well, I've hardly been treated as well as a stable hand. Perhaps you should practice riding in the back of that ... that truck just to be abused and humiliated," she threatened in a shaky voice.

"My dear, abuse and humiliation seems to agree with you beautifully," he taunted, admiring her amusing appearance.
"We can argue another time. Right now I suggest you get settled and do something about that most unusual smell. Although I must admit a roll in the hay does sound like fun, unfortunately I must put business before pleasure. Maybe some other time." He winked and turned away.

Before Amy could protest, he'd already summoned Maria and left the room.

"This way, Senorita." The same smiling woman who had shut her out, bowed slightly and motioned for her to follow her up the winding staircase.

Her suite was absolutely marvelous. Amy had never seen anything quite like it. Unlike the bold Spanish-Indian decor she'd expected, the effects were soft and feminine—truly fit for a princess. The suite consisted of two rooms, the bedroom with private bath, and the sitting room that overlooked the flower garden and an oversized pool hidden in the courtyard by those massive shrubs she had seen earlier.

She walked slowly over to the large brass bed draped in a pale lavender satin spread. White satin pillows decorated with small quilted orchids ornamented the bed and window seat. As she gazed about the room, her eyes rested on the delicate wicker furnishings. Their whiteness accented the plush orchid carpeting exquisitely. Walking through the suite admiring its many delicacies, Amy totally forgot the presence of anyone else. She gently ran her hand across the smooth satin draperies that fell gracefully to the floor like a sleek royal garment.

"It is very beautiful. No?" Maria boasted, smiling.
Amy turned with a start and agreed somewhat shyly. While looking at the pleasant young woman standing proudly beside the brass headboard, Amy's attention was captured by a large china vase filled with fresh orchids sitting on a corner table.

"Maria, did you put these in here? They're lovely," she exclaimed, walking over to smell the fragrant bouquet. "Thank you, they're gorgeous," she smiled, without giving the other woman a chance to reply.

"Yes, they are. But it was Mr. Thorn who bought them and made sure I arranged them just right."

"That was very kind of him; I'll have to thank him personally," Amy said warmly, wondering why he had bothered to give her orchids.

"Excuse me, senorita, but I think it's time you should make yourself beautiful," Maria said shyly, glancing at the bathroom.

"Oh, of course," Amy giggled, amused at both Maria's broken English and the vivid contrast her appearance must make with the elegant surroundings. "Forgive me, Maria, but what about my luggage?"

"Oh, si. No problem." Maria opened the closet and Amy's clothes were in full view.

"You do think of everything, don't you?" Amy said, deciding she was going to like Maria. Samson must have taken her luggage through a back entrance, and while she was making her grand entrance, Maria must have taken care of her wardrobe.

"I leave you to some privacy. I be back later and help you get dressed." Before Amy could thank her, Maria had closed the door quietly behind her.

Quickly Amy undressed and retrieved her robe from the closet. Even
though the large sunken tub looked quite inviting, she decided a hot shower would do her more good. The pulsating water beating on her fatigued body slowly brought her back to life. She hadn't realized just how sore she was from her wild ride until she felt her tense muscles relax from the massaging spray. Reluctantly leaving the comfort of the steaming shower, she rubbed herself vigorously with a large towel. Securing the sash on her robe, she left the bathroom and walked over to the dressing table where she found her cosmetics arranged carefully for her convenience. After drying and fashioning her hair into a simple but becoming style that hung thickly on her shoulders and was held back from her face with two dainty shell combs, she applied a light coat of foundation and mascara.

She had just finished dressing herself in her undergarments, when Maria knocked softly and entered.

"Excuse me, senorita, but Mr. Thorn wishes to see you at the pool as soon as you've dressed," Maria ordered good naturedly.

As if in full charge of the situation, the young woman walked over to the closet and began sorting through Amy's things. "Thank you, Maria, but I think I can dress myself," Amy said.

"But senorita, this is my job. Mr. Thorn, he say I'm your personal er ... helper," she almost pleaded.

Amy gave in to Maria's pleas and decided to discuss the matter with Marcus later. However, she was quite surprised with Maria's efficient manner. With Maria's insistence, she dressed in a soft white shift with a scooped neckline. The matching belt brought the dress's hemline to the fashionable thigh length. While Maria chose a single gold choker,
Amy slipped into a pair of white sandals. As a final touch, Maria removed the shell comb above her right ear and replaced it with one of the orchids from the vase.

"Now, you ready ... muy bonita ... er ... very beautiful," Maria stuttered excitedly.

Amy paused to look at herself in the lighted mirror on the dressing table. Indeed it was a great improvement. The white dress against her slightly blushed skin gave her a look of innocence. And her deep copper hair glistened against the soft orchid which matched the color of her eyes.

"You ready to go?" Maria asked. "I show you the way."

"Yes, thank you, Maria. But I think I can find the way myself."

Silently Maria nodded with a little disapproval and left Amy to make her journey alone.

Just outside the pool area Amy paused to get a tight grip on her senses. Despite her fight for self-control, she was nervous about meeting Marcus for the first time on his terms. She knew that she shouldn't be nervous. After all it was only a business arrangement—he was her boss and nothing more. But she found it difficult to control the weakness in her legs as she walked over to the edge of the pool.
Chapter Seven

"Did you want to see me?" Amy directed her question to Marcus, who was holding onto the pool's edge watching her every move and seeming to focus on the short length of her dress.

"You could say that," he grinned, admiringly.

Momentarily Amy met his mischievous gaze and quickly seated herself on a nearby lounge chair thereby limiting the territory to be explored.

"Why don't you join me? I'm sure we could strike up an interesting conversation during the backstroke," he said.

"No, thanks." She ignored his flirtatious suggestion.

"Well, if the mountain won't come to Mohammed, I daresay that Mohammed shall come to the mountain." He boosted himself effortlessly out of the pool.

He looks more like the mountain, she thought, looking at his muscular physique clad in brief trunks. The damp clinging swimsuit exposed the rigid lines of his narrow firm hips. She also noticed the dark curling hair that ran the full length of his chest and thickened at the waistband of the low-cut briefs.

"Are you just going to sit there, or are you going to offer me a towel?" He pointed to a linen cart.

After she gave him a towel, Amy felt embarrassed that he had caught her staring, and she was relieved when he turned his back to dry himself.
Once again she found herself admiring the brawny frame of the dark giant standing before her. She couldn't help observing the strength of his thick back muscles that relaxed along his trim waist and rounded buttocks. The rippling effect of his long athletic legs reminded her of a strong thoroughbred stallion. Amy ventured further to compare him with his surroundings. There was something strange about his dark appearance that seemed to fit perfectly with his fortress. Yet something was missing--at this moment she couldn't imagine him, filling the role of a cattle breeder. Though years of working in the hot Colorado sun had weathered his features, there was still a missing link that kept her from branding him the All-American Cowboy. Perhaps the final clue was hidden in the darkness of those steel-gray eyes that had all too many times sent strange sensual shudders through her spine. Whatever this mystery concerning his heritage and his wild love for the land, she silently hoped she would be an active part in placing the pieces together.

Suddenly, Amy realized Marcus was no longer at poolside. She quickly glanced around her and saw him, now dressed in a white linen shirt and navy running shorts. With each lithe movement he made in her direction, Amy became more aware of the virility of this man. The casualness of his shirt that hung open to his waist, allowed the thick mat of chest hair to glisten against the dampness of his skin. The striking blackness of his wet hair shone against the bright sun like the velvet plumage of a jet-black raven.

"Here, I thought you might like something cool to drink." He glanced down at her through a thick uplifted brow.
Amy wasn't sure if he was thinking of the warm weather or more personal matters. Nevertheless, determined not to quarrel with him, she bit back an angry response and quickly accepted his offering of iced ginger ale. "Thanks. The sun is rather warm this time of year, isn't it?" she said, challenging the meaning of his earlier remark.

He sensed her challenge, but shrugged indifferently and chose the vacant lounger next to hers. "So, what do you think of my little spread?" He searched her face while waiting for a response.

"Well, quite frankly, I'm a bit surprised."

"Oh?" He raised his brow signifying a question.

"Uh, I hardly expected anything so ... exquisite. Honestly, it's absolutely beautiful. But I do have one question, though."

"I'm afraid to ask what. But I will anyway." He smiled, moving his chair a little closer.

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle," she laughed. I just think that the name Circle T is hardly appropriate for this place."

"Perhaps, but don't you think that it's what the name represents that matters?" Without giving her an opportunity to agree, he continued his explanation. "My great-great-grandfather settled here over a century ago. Of course, when he first started, he owned less than one fourth the acreage and only a few head of cattle. Back then the main house was only a crude shack, but from the very beginning he had had high expectations for this place. He had always intended for the ranch to be passed from one Thorn generation to the next. You know, sort of like a family circle on a family tree."

"What a beautiful thought for him to have!" Amy blushed, thinking
she'd been so stupid commenting on the name. "I'm sorry, I really wasn't thinking," she apologized.

"There's no need to apologize, really. I don't expect you to understand my love for this land," he said smiling.

Somehow Amy was hurt by this statement. For deep inside she knew she wanted to learn everything she possibly could about his heritage. "Well, I can sure see that good fortune has followed the Thorn family over the years."

"Yes, that and a lot of hard work as well. Over the years, my ancestors worked very hard breeding cattle and acquiring land. In fact, story has it that my great grandfather nearly starved himself by constantly investing his earnings in land and cattle.

All this came along much later, I'm afraid. To make a long story short, by the time my father fell heir to the ranch, the place was pretty much settled financially. My grandfather had just purchased the last two-hundred acres in the south section, and the Thorn breeding ranch was becoming well known throughout the state when he passed away. While my father worked day and night to enlarge the ranch's breeding capacity, he started planning a new ranchhouse—one that he thought would put the cover on the book of the Thorn ancestry."

"I think he did a good job making his dream come true," Amy interrupted, looking around her and understanding the pride that stood behind the place.

"I'm sorry to say that my father never lived to see this place anywhere but on a blueprint. You see, my parents were killed in a plane crash while I was away at college. So I decided to carry out my father's
plans," he said, with a tender expression etching the firm line of his jaw.

For a moment Amy admired the sincerity in his tone; then she became curious how a cattle breeder could build something so unique.

As if reading her mind, Marcus interrupted her thoughts. "In case you haven't already guessed, I'm a licensed architect."

"You mean you actually designed this place?"

"And made sure each brick was set correctly." He looked up at the towering structure proudly. "But there's more to a man's ancestry than a dwelling," he said, pausing to find exactly the right words. "It's the land too, you know. That's what seals the history—nothing but mother earth."

Mother earth, where had she heard that particular reference to the land before? she wondered, trying to figure out what bloodlines flooded life into this man's veins.

Finally, Amy roused enough courage to ask him who his ancestors were.

For a moment she thought he was going to tell her, but after studying her intensely, he evidently changed his mind. "Oh, I'll bore you with all the minute details later. But first, there's something I'd like to show you. That is, if you'll trust me for a few hours." He reverted once again to his mischievous grin.

"Oh, I don't know, I mean, what about my job? Shouldn't I be getting settled into some kind of routine?" At the moment, her job seemed like a relatively good excuse. Because the truth was, it wasn't Marcus that she was worrying about trusting, it was herself. She wasn't sure she
could keep her feelings hidden any longer—especially if she was alone with him for an extended period of time. At least, here she knew that the houseworkers were close by.

"If it's your job you're worrying about, then don't. I'm the boss, remember? Are you sure that's all that's bothering you?" He raised a questioning brow.

"Of course, what else is there?" she said nervously.

"In that case, let's get started. I'll get Maria to pack us some dinner so we won't need to leave early." He ignored her question.

"Where are we going? I mean, I at least need to know how to dress," she stammered.

"I suggest you choose something more suitable for walking. Can you meet me in the courtyard in twenty minutes?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but ..."

Amy was unable to finish her sentence, for as soon as she answered his question, he left the pool area.

"That man! He makes my skin crawl, even when he's being nice to me," she muttered while walking toward the house.

Once inside her room, Amy abandoned her sandals for a pair of sport socks and a pair of sneakers. Since she was unsure of what to expect from Marcus, she decided that something durable, but comfortable, would be in order. She carefully chose a pair of loose-fitting khaki walking shorts and a matching sweatshirt. Reluctantly she removed the orchid and placed it in the vase with the others. After weaving her hair into a single braid, Amy considered her appearance in the vanity mirror.
Satisfied that she was suitable for a casual outing, she emptied the contents of her purse into a soft canvas tote and left to meet Marcus.

Amy stood spellbound in the large courtyard. She couldn't believe her eyes. Marcus was sitting in the driver's seat of her jeep casually waiting her return. At first she wasn't sure if she should be angry or hurt. But she followed her first instinct as she approached the vehicle.

"What is my jeep doing here? I thought you told me that Toby took it back to the ranch." Anger controlled her words.

"I did. But I didn't say which ranch, now did I?"

"Why you ... I don't know what you're up to but ..."

"But I didn't want you driving this thing until I was sure that my mechanic had repaired it first."

"Well, then, I suppose I should thank you for your concern." She forced a crooked smile, refusing to feel sorry for her premature outburst.

"Precisely. And I suppose I should have mentioned it earlier this afternoon, but I thought it unimportant."

"I guess you're right." As usual, she thought. "I've just been on my guard lately."

"Don't just stand there. Hop in, and let's see about taking some of the edginess out of you and this machine." He switched on the ignition and dismissed the matter.

No sooner than Amy had shut the door, the jeep roared to life and they were speeding toward the main road leaving behind small clouds of
swirling dust.

"It seems to be working perfectly now." Amy observed the blurring scenery, thinking how the melting colors of the passing trees and wild flowers made a beautiful collage against the canvas of the blue sky.

"Now, see, I was totally innocent. My mechanic had to make a few minor adjustments, and as you can see, she's as good as new." Marcus turned for her approval, then negotiated the jeep onto a route that was unfamiliar to her.

"Where are we going?" Their present speed along with the wind rippling through the open top caused her question to fade into a hoarse whisper.

"Oh, you'll find out soon enough. Why don't you just relax and enjoy the country?"

Not willing to strain her voice any further, Amy settled herself into a comfortable position and concentrated on the beautiful afternoon. But what she hadn't intended to do was to yield herself to a state of total relaxation. The calming effect of the scenery and the warmth of the autumn sun beaming down through the jeep's open top welcomed the effects of Amy's delayed exhaustion from the past two days. At first she slipped into a comfortable state of semi-consciousness and made sure she kept her distance from Marcus by resting her head against the back of the passenger seat. However, as deep sleep began to take full control of her physical actions, Amy was unaware of seeking a more restful position elsewhere.

A sudden jolt produced by the jeep's short turn onto a rocky and
steep incline shook Amy into hazy consciousness. For a moment she was back at the ranch, snuggled close to one of Aunt Ellen's thick feather pillows. But after readjusting her position, she realized that she was not only lying against a firm and somewhat puzzling object, but she was also moving.

"It's about time you're awake," Marcus's voice vibrated in her left ear.

No wonder! She was lying with her feet propped in the passenger seat, and her upper body was being supported by Marcus's right side. "Oh, you shouldn't have let me fall asleep," she grumbled, trying to hide her embarrassment.

Sitting upright, Amy tried to compose herself, but the pink crease marks that sleep had left on her face kept reminding her of her carelessness.

"Don't worry. It's no big deal. In fact, I'm becoming quite used to coming to your aid."

"I'm sure you are, but if you recall, I've never asked for your help."

"Bite your tongue, young lady," he teased. "You might like to know that I don't play the knight in shining armor to every beautiful damsel in distress." He smiled broadly at her childish sulkiness.

It was precisely this effect on her that Amy hated most about Marcus. Besides his obvious good looks and her physical attraction to him, Marcus's strength, self-confidence and boyish cockiness were constantly wearing down Amy's will to resist him. One moment she would be deliciously angry with him, and the next she wanted to laugh with him
at her childishness. "All right, I suppose you're right. I'm just
tired, and this heat is suffocating me." She wiped beads of perspiration
from her forehead.

"I don't think it's the heat. Actually, the temperature is only
about seventy degrees. It's the elevation. The higher the altitude,
the denser the air, and if you're not used to it, it can be rather
miserable. Try taking long deep breaths and see if that helps any."
His sudden show of concern amazed Amy.

The jeep slowly crawled the height of the winding mountain, and
Amy, after taking Marcus's advice, began to feel somewhat better. "Now
will you tell me where we're going--it's too late for me to walk home
if I don't approve," she said lightheartedly.

Once again Marcus returned to a serious mood. "Since you seemed
interested in my family ancestry, I wanted to show you what my ancestors
considered the heart of this state."

"I'm still not sure what all this has to do with your forefathers
and your love for the land."

But soon, the latter part of Amy's question was answered. The
steep incline leveled into a fantasy land of fertile greenery and wild-
life. The immaculate area was astonishing. The land was covered with
countless lakes--stretching as far as she could see. Amy was too
devastated by the magnificent grandeur to refuse Marcus's offer to help
her out of the jeep. She gladly took his extended arm in escort through
the vast land of wilderness.

"From the expression on your face, I take it you're not disappointed."
"Disappointed? Are you kidding? I'm totally fascinated. It's the most beautiful place I've ever seen. I never realized something like this even existed."

"You do have a lot to learn about Colorado, don't you? Well, as you can see, this is the other side to that stereotyped western roughness."

"Yes, I can see that. I'm sorry to say I haven't been back here since I was ten, and I really never had the chance to visit many of the scenic spots when I was a child. I was always so wrapped up with Uncle Jake and watching bronc breaking and cattle branding," Amy apologized for her ignorance of the area's culture. "But if I had known that something like this was around, I would've found time to get away from the ranch."

"I agree with your choice of scenery myself. I'd choose the Grand Mesa any day to certain ranch necessities."

"The Grand Mesa. Somehow the name fits it perfectly. The lakes here are grand in themselves." She urged Marcus toward one of the azure ponds.

"Yes, there are hundreds of lakes that expand across the mesa. Did you know that you're standing on top of the world's largest flat-top mountain? The plateau stretches for fifty-three square miles and the base rises five thousand feet above the valley floor."

"It's amazing. How do you explain the natural phenomenon of all these lakes that form the breadth of such a large mountain?" Amy looked up at Marcus, hoping he would tell her more about the area.

"Well, as a matter of fact, the Indians do have an explanation for
the creation of the area's lakes. According to the legend, a grand eagle that nested along the edge of the mesa carried off an Indian child. Then, the child's revengeful father disguised himself with tree bark, crept up to the eagle's nest, and hurled all her young eaglets to the base of the mountain, where a large serpent devoured them. The enraged eagle then found the serpent and carried it high in the air while tearing it to pieces; and when the pieces made contact with the earth, they made deep tombs."

Amy shuddered, and tightened her grip on Marcus's arm.

"Shall I continue?"

Amy nodded.

"The eagle's rage was so great that the mesa trembled with clashes of thunder. Then, torrents of rain filled the deep tombs, forming the beautiful lakes of the Grand Mesa."

"I didn't upset you, did I? It's only an old legend." Marcus paused to search her expression.

"No, I'm not upset. I guess I didn't expect anything with such a sad ending to be responsible for something that brings such happiness as this." She motioned toward the scenery and sighed contentedly.

"You're happy, aren't you?" Marcus gently turned her toward him and stared into her deep violet eyes.

For a moment they stood as lovers—the only humans in the western Garden of Eden. Each seemed to be searching the other for a hint of true feelings: Amy trembled as she found herself hypnotized by the sensual gaze of this giant of a man who was pulling her closer to his rigid body.
Oh God, he's going to kiss me, she thought. But she didn't resist, because at this very moment it seemed natural, as natural as the animals seeking food from the fertile vegetation surrounding the lake.

As Marcus tilted his head, Amy lifted her face toward his, tightening her embrace around his firm waistline. Closing her eyes, she welcomed the pleasure of his moist lips that parted her own and sent delicious shivers through her veins. Amy wanted to return the sweetness that he was giving her. She clung to him until she was beginning to lose control of her senses. Allowing her hands to explore the bulk of his shoulders, she uttered an excited moan as she felt the rippling nerves of his back signifying his own physical excitement. But all too soon it was over. He lifted his head, leaving Amy's lips feeling swollen and betrayed.

"I'm really pleased that you like it here, Amy. Come on, there's something else I'd like you to see." He looked warmly into her sparkling eyes.

The casualness of his voice cut through her chest like a sharp blade. The kiss hadn't meant any more to him than an act of appreciation—no more than a token of thankfulness given to a friend who shared his same interests for this land. She'd been such a fool to believe that he was actually enjoying it as much as she was, though she couldn't blame him. Why would he want to waste his time with her, an employee; and worse yet, he probably thought she was nothing more than a spoiled child. But still, she wouldn't be used. She would have to force her body not to submit to him again.
"I hope I'll be able to break in my new sneakers." Amy brushed off the incident as coolly as he had.

Marcus's dark eyes narrowed and met the sparks flying from her own. Amy had expected to see a matching glare of sarcasm. Instead, she saw a look of disappointment. Could she have misunderstood his intentions after all? Not likely. She couldn't expect him to feel the same way about her. For the first time in her life Amy realized what it meant to really love a man. To love him with her heart and soul. But she knew that she had to keep her feelings hidden. She couldn't bear the idea of another man knowing that he had hurt her. She lowered her head as if unmoved by the ordeal and started in the direction of the jeep.

"The falls are this way." Marcus turned toward her grin­ning boy­ishly.

"Water falls? This place has everything," she said, returning a vibrant smile. As far as she was concerned the matter was dropped, and she was going to make the best of the remainder of the day.

As Amy had expected, like everything else, the falls were gorgeous. Although small, their beauty made up for their size. The thrusting rapids were broken into three cascades surging over large gray rocks and filtering into a whirlpool of white foam. The site was picture perfect. Even man with his modern technology couldn't perfect the mounds of green velvet moss that filled the distance between each of the falls. Amy's attention was quickly directed to an oddity located several feet behind the walls of water. Sheltered by the overhanging layers of moss
and almost totally secluded by the tunneling falls was an enormous table-top constructed from solid rock. Its diameter was large enough for several people to lie side by side across its center.

"I guess this is as good a place as any to have dinner, don't you think?" Marcus's eyes twinkled at the excited look on Amy's face.

"I think it'll be better closer to the falls, where the grass is shorter." She misread his intentions.

"No. I mean over there." He pointed to the table-round.

"Is it possible?" she responded eagerly.

"Sure, come on." He took her hand and led her behind the falls.

Marcus's long stride bounded easily up the natural rock steps. Once on top of the large table-top, he extended a strong arm to Amy, boosted her as if she were weightless, and refused to release his grip until she was safe by his side.

"Now, you make yourself cozy while I get our dinner." He shrugged eagerly and left her to her thoughts.

Though the sound of rushing water pouring into the distant pool below was quite loud, Amy welcomed every drop of the light mist that revived her body from head to toe.

Either she had underestimated the distance to the jeep, or Marcus had run every step of the way, for no sooner had she settled herself in a comfortable position than he arrived laden with a large picnic basket and a thick blanket.

After spreading the warm blanket, both of them sat in a crossed-legged position, and Marcus began unpacking the contents of the basket.
"Let's see. Chicken, potato salad, relish ... a feast fit for true royalty, your majesty." Marcus bowed at the waist in a noble manner. "We may not be having dinner on a moonlit terrace and sipping imported champagne, but can you think of a better substitute than ginger ale served on such a divine table and being serenaded by Mother Nature herself?"

"I agree with you absolutely," Amy said, while searching through the basket for plates and napkins. She wasn't about to interpret his romantic gestures, so she began filling their plates.

"Mmm ... this chicken is delicious. Maria must be an excellent cook."

"Yes, she is. Most Indians are."

This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for. She had been curious since early afternoon about his interest in Indian decor and legendry. "How do you know so much about the Indians? And Maria ... I don't quite understand the connection between her Indian blood and her Spanish language."

"Whoa, one question at a time. As far as my interests go, I'm one-half Indian. My father was full-blooded and my mother was a Spanish American. The Thorn name is a translation taken from the porcupine, whose quills were used by my ancestors for weaving as well as dressing the great chiefs for war. Maria has the same ancestry as I do, except her family left the reservations and settled along the Mexican border."

Amy found it odd that he resembled his mother more than his father. In fact, other than the customary high cheek bones, the rest of his
features, though dark, carried American traits. But still, Amy could easily imagine Marcus adorned in a full headdress of porcupine needles and his tanned body clothed only in a deerskin shield. The thought of seeing him half naked caused her to shiver.

"Are you cold?" Marcus asked, noticing Amy wrap her arms around her chest.

"What ... oh, I must've drunk the ginger ale too quickly, that's all." She flushed as if he had read her private thoughts.

Amy redirected the conversation. "Why didn't your ancestors stay on the reservation?"

"Some of them did, but as I said earlier, my great-great-grandfather had a dream of owning some of the white man's land so he could prove the Indian could raise beef like anyone else," he said proudly.

"And I'm sure he would've been proud of the family's accomplishment." Amy felt a surge of emotion for this powerful man, who still valued family roots.

"I'd like to think that he would. Well, if we plan to get off this mountain before sunset, we'd better eat up."

Amy nodded, but she couldn't help noticing the emptiness in his last words; something was missing, but she didn't know what.

The rest of their meal was spent in silence. Marcus finished first and placed his dishes in a plastic bag Maria had provided for them. Amy did the same, and began packing the scattered contents of the basket. The distance between them was filled with heavy static. Amy wondered if Marcus detected the electric current filling the air. She feared if either touched, sparks would definitely fly. So she decided to play it
wisely and break the static through conversation.

"I guess that's all of it. Would you like more ginger ale before I pack the thermos?" She purposefully avoided his gaze.

"No, thanks. I'm fine." He stood to fold the blanket.

"Well, if we have everything, we're ready to leave. I'll take this down first; then I'll help you."

"Thanks, but I think I can manage." Amy wanted to avoid the slightest physical contact with him as much as possible.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Especially in those canvas shoes. You don't want another bout with a sprained ankle, do you?" He raised a questioning brow.

Without answering, Amy waited nervously for him to help her down the slippery rocks.

All around them the dying sun's special effects were dancing on the falls and reflecting colorful spectrums onto the frothy whirlpool. The entire area glittered like a field of sparkling diamonds, especially the wild flowers' prismatic images projecting on the crystal lakes.

"It's so beautiful, I'm sorry I have to leave."

"I know what you mean. We'll have to come again soon," he said, using the plural form.

Marcus's large hands reached upward and grasped Amy's slender waist. Naturally, she placed both hands on his taut shoulders while he lifted her off the large rock onto the soft grass.

When the ground was safely beneath her, she was aware that Marcus was still holding her tightly. Her slender hands felt his neck muscles
go rigid. Looking up into his intoxicating gaze, Amy watched his steel-gray eyes as they combed every facet of her tensed figure. Instantly, she became aware of her damp sweatshirt and its effect on her full breasts. She knew she must somehow say something in order to break the mounting tension.

"I'm afraid I didn't bring a change of clothes. I guess I'll have to wear these wet ones," she remarked tightly.

The color of his eyes changed to deep charcoal and wandered back to her clinging sweatshirt, stopping only to survey her expressionless face. "Perhaps you should have; you don't want to catch cold."

His hands moved from her waist to brush the damp tendrils from her forehead and support the back of her neck. The seductive gesture parted Amy's lips with a delicate gasp. As his mouth began to move closer, he shifted one of his hands to the center of her spine and applied just enough pressure to melt her body into his.

Amy was limp in his arms when their lips finally met. The searching firmness of his mouth gently and slowly caressed every curve and line of her own. Her pounding heart felt as if it would explode if she didn't get a grip on her senses.

However, he showed her no mercy. His moist lips continued their investigation, sliding over the smoothness of her cheek, pausing only at her ear lobes. In order to keep her balance, her fingers dug into the slick flesh of his damp shoulders.

"Oh God, I want you, Amy," he groaned in an animal-like manner. Each trembling breath he took sent balls of fire racing up her spine, causing her to expel little gurgling sounds from her burning throat.
Her physical response quickened intenser desires in him, and he moaned in ecstasy as he took a firmer possession of her lips and explored the hungry depths of her mouth.

Totally out of control, Amy tiptoed to massage her fingers in the thick curls of his hair. Her sudden change in position sent his hands over her shoulders, her back, and then beneath her shirt to her heaving breasts. The kiss matured until Amy ached from the hot desires that boiled within her.

Slowly she felt the desire leaving his lips, and he removed his mouth to end their intimate embrace. Bewildered and disappointed, she lowered her chin to her chest. She was too embarrassed to look into his eyes. It seemed minutes before either could establish a normal breathing pattern. While she was trying to calm her emotions, Marcus bent his head so that her eyes were forced to meet his.

"We'll never get home by dark if we keep this up," he managed in a steady voice.

"No, I guess not." She pulled her arms to her sides and stepped back so he would loosen his hold.

He freed her completely and reached for the picnic supplies. "I guess we should be going," he said reluctantly.

Amy nodded and followed Marcus toward the jeep.

The drive back to the hacienda was virtually silent. Although she did find herself trying to search Marcus's profile for any hint of his feelings about their passionate encounter, she found nothing but a blank expression glued to the winding mountain road.
They were traveling the long stretch to the main house sooner than Amy realized. Marcus pulled into the garage and smoothly maneuvered the jeep into a vacant stall beside the Mercedes. "Would you like to see some of the grounds before you go inside?" Marcus turned to her before switching off the ignition.

"Yes, I would," she said opening the door of the jeep. She was as surprised at herself for accepting as she was at Marcus for asking. After all, it was past eight o'clock, and you couldn't see much of the grounds by moonlight.

As if reading her thoughts, Marcus walked over to the garage entrance and flipped on several switches in a large electrical power box. Then he took her hand and they ventured into the garden.

Amy was amazed. The garden and surrounding grounds had come to life by hundreds of yellow floodlamps that shed their pale beams on the area. The dew-kissed roses and philodendrons made shimmering spirals as they climbed their way up the slick trellises. Numerous varieties of flowers and plants outlined the huge garden maze. Amy noticed when the moonlight captured the beams from the floodlamps and touched the bright flowery colors in just the right way, the garden looked like a bright mosaic against the backdrop of the darkened night.

After leaving the garden, Amy caught the silhouette of a large gazebo, a perfect replica of the 19th-century southern plantation style. Marcus, noticing her appeal for the over-sized structure, steered her in its direction.

"Whatever enticed you to build something as traditional as this?" Amy smiled inwardly, as she ran her hands along the detailed carvings
on the side rails of the gazebo.

"For a number of reasons, really." He gently turned her to face him. "But I thought it would be a nice place for children to play and daydream on, especially on evenings like this," he said, looking at Amy with a serious expression.

"This would be a delight for any child." Her eyes shyly met his.

"Do you like children, Amy?"

"Oh yes, of course, I do." She nervously wondered what he was getting at.

"I've always wanted a large family. I think that makes a marriage complete. But I've always seemed to be too busy. That is until now ..."

Amy dared not let him finish his sentence. For she was afraid of what he was going to say. "My, it's getting late. I'd better turn in, I've got a long day tomorrow," she stammered and turned to make her exit.

"Good night," she heard him say in a low hoarse voice.

Though she had expected him to stop her from leaving so suddenly, he didn't. At least Marcus was capable of letting her keep her dignity. She'd been such a fool. At the time, she was so sure that he was going to ask her to marry him. But now, the cool air from her brisk walk through the courtyard had left serious doubts in her mind.

By the time she had reached her room, she had thoroughly convinced herself that she'd been an absolute idiot. If he had any intentions of marrying anyone, it was probably Jacqueline. "That's it," she thought, he was going to tell her that he was going to marry someone else just
to let her know that today had been nothing more than a last fling before the wedding.

She flung her clothes from her body. She didn't want anything close to her that reminded her of today. She was in love with Marcus Thorn, the man whom she wanted more than anything to hate. Too exhausted to fight her inward battle any longer, she threw herself across the bed in a blind fury of tears.
Chapter Eight

Amy woke to the sound of knocking at her door. "May I come in?" The voice of Marcus Thorn caressed her ears.

"Uh ... just a minute," she moaned sleepily, reaching for the robe at the foot of her bed and flashing a sidelong glance at her watch lying on the dressing table. "Eleven o'clock! I couldn't have slept that long!" Amy jumped to the floor. "God, I'm a mess!" Her tangled hair and swollen eyes gave silent testimony to a restless night. Well, she couldn't take forever to answer the door or Marcus would become suspicious. She cinched the belt on her robe tightly to gather in courage and slowly padded to the door.

"My, you're a late sleeper." Marcus surveyed her swollen eyes longer than Amy liked. "Do you make it a habit to sleep on top of the covers?" He pointed to the bed that was still fully made and only showed the slightest sign of earlier occupancy.

"Oh, I was so tired I fell asleep while I was trying to catch up on some reading," she lied.

"I see." His eyes searched the area for the evidence of a book, and found none.

Amy blushed embarrassedly as she sat down on the edge of the bed. "What did you want to see me about?" For the first time she noticed that Marcus, like herself, showed signs of a restless night. She noticed the dark shadows of stubble that painted his chin and cheeks.
and the redness of his eyes that hid their usually deep gray color.

"I thought you might like to take a trip with me to one of the reservations this afternoon."

Without raising her head Amy answered tonelessly. "I don't know, I have a lot to do around here if I'm going to learn the routine of the ranch any time soon."

"This is a business trip, you know. Since Thorn Enterprises supplies a lot of beef to the Indians for food, I thought it would be good for you to see how some of our business transactions are handled."

"But isn't this a breeding ranch?" she shot out at him. "It is, primarily, but someone has to supply meat to the government agencies, and because of our size, we can afford to sell our product for much less than the smaller ranches."

"Oh, I see. Well, if you think I should go, I will. After all you're the boss," she said coolly.

"I just think since you're going to be around here for a while, you need to know as much as possible about this area and my business. Dress casually and I'll meet you downstairs in thirty minutes." He flashed an engaging smile and disappeared.

A great weariness almost overcame Amy as she walked toward the bathroom. She didn't know how much longer she could stand torturing herself in this way. It nearly tore her heart out when she was with him, knowing that he didn't share even a small amount of the love she felt for him. And worse yet, it hurt nearly as bad when she wasn't with him. She didn't know what she was going to do about the situation. She knew she was only punishing herself by inflicting false hope into
every gesture he made toward her. Oh, well, she told herself, "I'll worry about that later. But first I have to get ready for my first day on the job." But somehow she knew that there wasn't going to be much work accomplished.

She met a clean-shaven Marcus in the foyer. And he, like herself, was clad in tight-fitting jeans, a sweatshirt, and boots. Each stood admiring the other, but Marcus was the first to speak. "You should wear your hair down more often," he said, his eyes raking her figure from head to toe.

"Thank you, but I always thought it made me look much too young."

"I think a beautiful woman should show off her attributes. Not many have your combination of copper hair and violet eyes." He smiled.

"I've never really thought of myself as beautiful. But thanks again."

"Well, if you're ready, we'd better get started."

Amy nodded and followed Marcus out the door.

The sight of the old battered truck that had carried her to the ranch caused her a momentary shudder. But seeing Samson nowhere in sight, she relaxed somewhat.

"You'll have to crawl in from the driver's side; I'm afraid the lock on the other door is broken." Marcus apologized as he helped Amy into the seat.

The truck sputtered and ratted down the lane. Once again Amy felt she was in for another interesting encounter with Marcus. But still she had to somehow find out the answer to the one question that
was boring a hole through her. Just what was his relationship with Jacqueline? Well, there was no time like the present to find out. She'd always been a straightforward person and she could see no reason why she should stop being one now. She'd ask him outright. But when? Should she wait until the time was exactly right? No. If she waited, she'd never ask. She'd ask him now. But before she'd finished battling with her thoughts, she heard herself speaking aloud.

"Will Jacqueline be showing me my duties at the ranch?"

"Why should she?" His glance was both humorous and questioning.

"I don't know, I just thought that uh ... she ... would want to make sure that I was doing things to her satisfaction." There, she'd said it, but she wasn't sure whether she had gotten her point across.

"I'm still not sure if I know what you're talking about. I'd like to know what you think Jacqueline has to do with your being hostess at my ranch." This time she knew she saw a slight amusing grin wrinkle the corners of his mouth.

"Darn, what did I get myself into?" She thought inwardly. Now he probably knew that she was interested in him, not to mention the fact that she was forced to explain herself without sounding too inquisitive. "Well, you know, you and her ..."

"Oh, I get it. Is that what you think? What Jacqueline and I once had has been over for several years, though sometimes she'd like to think differently. But I won't be trapped into any relationship by any woman. When I'm ready, she'll be the first to know. Now, has that answered your question?"

"Yes, I was only curious, that's all." "Well," she thought, "I
guess he as much told me that he wasn't interested in me."

"Now, I suggest that you get your mind off Jacqueline and try
to enjoy the rest of the day."

Smiling inwardly, Amy relaxed and enjoyed the remainder of their
ride. However, she was quite surprised to find that they were pull­
ing into what appeared to be a private landing strip. Sensing her
confusion, Marcus turned toward her.

"We'll have to arrive at the reservation by plane; it's a couple
hundred miles from here, and this way we'll get there sooner. You
have flown, haven't you?" Marcus studied her somewhat confused
expression.

"Oh yes, of course. I'm just a little surprised, that's all. I
was under the impression that the reservation was only a few miles
away. I had no idea ..."

Marcus cut her last remark. "You do have a lot to learn about
this area, don't you? It doesn't matter. You'll have plenty of time
to learn," he said decisively, and helped her out of the truck.

Amy wondered what he meant by his last statement. Somehow she
had felt something permanent in his remark.

"I need to get these flight plans cleared at the office, so why
don't you go on over to the first hangar and wait for me." He
pointed to a row of identical metal buildings.

Once inside the hangar, Amy fixed her eyes on a small but quite
elaborate private plane. Her eyes traced the smooth white frame
splashed with silver stripes and rested on bold black lettering that
read THORN ENTERPRISES. At first she was surprised, but the feeling soon left her when she realized that, after all, Marcus Thorn was a millionaire cattle breeder and he had every reason to own his own private aircraft.

"How do you like her?" Amy turned with a start to find Marcus standing directly behind her.

"She's beautiful," Amy said, running her hands along the smooth lettering on the side of the plane.

"Would you like to see the cockpit?" he asked, escorting her to the passenger's side of the plane.

Amy found herself sitting on a plush velour seat, facing several complicated instrument panels while Marcus was settling himself into the pilot's seat.

"This is really something. I haven't seen a private plane quite so elaborate," she said, admiring the leather-padded ceiling and the pale-blue upholstered seats.

"Well, I must admit comfort is one of my weaknesses." He opened a small door at the rear of the cabin that revealed a sleeping area complete with a bar.

"You do think of everything, don't you?" Amy raised an approving brow wondering what other weakness he could possibly have.

"I try to." he said firmly. "Well, if we're going to get to the reservation, we'd best get started."

"But, where's the pilot?" Somehow she felt that she was in for another one of his surprises.

"You're looking at him. Any objections?" His eyes twinkled down
at her. Amy couldn't miss the hint of mockery that turned the corners of his firm mouth into a faint smile. "Don't just sit there; buckle-up so we can get started." He secured his own lap belt.

The loudness of the plane's twin engines made it impossible for Amy to impose further conversation. So she resigned herself to fastening her own seatbelt and battling with her curiosity.

Marcus, in the pilot's seat, was requesting instructions for take-off.

"Ground control, this is Zero-niner requesting clearance."

A combination of nerves and excitement caused the pulse in her neck to thunder wildly to the beat of the racing engines. She turned her head toward the side window to prevent Marcus from guessing her nervousness. It wasn't that she doubted his capabilities as a pilot; it was the fact that everything he did amazed her--giving her even more reason to love him.

Amy returned her gaze to the front windshield when she felt the plane slowly taxi down the runway. The engines boomed when Marcus forced the acceleration as the control tower granted permission for take-off. She could see the excitement on his face as he glanced briefly over his shoulder when the plane began to gain speed. At the end of the stretch, Amy's heart leaped as Marcus expertly eased the control wheel backward.

With the engines now accelerating with full power, Amy could feel the landing gear retracting. They were off the ground! Seconds later the plane was soaring among the clouds.

Releasing the latch on her seat belt, Amy returned her gaze to
the side window. Though she had flown several times, she couldn't remember a prettier view than the one she was now seeing. The large mountains were veiled in a pale mist shadowing the contrasting whiteness of their snowcapped tops. They stood firmly protecting the checkerboard valley like the walls of a castle.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Marcus relaxed into his seat, switching the controls to auto-pilot.

"Yes, it is. I don't think I've ever seen a more beautiful sight from the air."

It was as if she had suddenly reminded Marcus of something he'd forgotten. He straightened himself and slowly turned the plane to the east. At first Amy was puzzled at his sudden decision to turn the plane. But in a few minutes she realized what he was doing.

They were flying over the Grand Mesa. The entire area was a fortress of mountains housing the numerous lakes and forests, which from the air reminded Amy of an artist's palette splotched with vivid blues, greens, and the orange-red colors of autumn. Amy sighed with elation and turned toward Marcus. But he wasn't looking at the mesa. Instead, he was studying her with a serious, yet soft expression. Then, as unexpectedly as he had turned the plane, he returned them back on course.

Being accustomed to flying, Amy didn't have to look out the windshield to know they were making their descent. After feeling the nose of the plane tilt slightly forward, she casually reached for her shoulder strap and snapped the belt in place. Marcus did the same and
radioed ground control to receive landing instructions.

She had half-expected a partially abandoned landing strip in the middle of nowhere. But she was only half correct. When the plane taxied off into a dilapidated hangar, they were surrounded by a rather large number of people. Before opening his door, Marcus reached behind his seat and retrieved two large bags.

As they climbed down from the cockpit, Amy and Marcus were surrounded by a group of smiling people from the reservation. Several young children were tugging playfully at Marcus's shirt, waiting for him to reveal the contents of the bags. When he did, she was filled with a warm surge of affection. The small children danced merrily with their treasures of candy and small toys. From somewhere in the crowd she heard a voice say, "Your Mr. Thorn loves the children," and turned to face an elderly woman by her side.

"Yes, he seems delighted by them." Amy warmed to the small wrinkled figure. "And the children, they seem to love him as well."

"Oh, yes. They count the days between his visits to the reservation. You're lucky to have a man that will make such a good father for your own children." Gently she patted Amy on the arm.

"But you don't understand, he's not ..." Amy's last statement was muffled by the happy greetings of the village people who were escorting them toward three pickup trucks.

She had lost sight of Marcus in the crowd and seated herself in the back of one of the crowded trucks. Momentarily she stood and gazed through the crowd but still saw no sign of him.

Though the ride to the reservation was rather long and somewhat
rough, Amy found the company among the people quite pleasant. In fact, she was quite amazed at the women, who were constantly admiring her hair and whispering secretive comments to each other. And, on one occasion she could've sworn she heard something mentioned about Marcus and the moon. She listened curiously and joined the light conversation with the women.

The reservation itself was more like a small town than the somewhat more traditional village she had expected. However, between the rows of tiny weathered houses were several leantos specifically designed for basket weaving and pottery work, and there was even a large quilting frame shared by several older women busily completing a blanket. The truck came to a halt in what seemed to be the center of the little community, and they were greeted by several of the older people who had chosen to wait for them there. Two small children smiled shyly at Amy as she climbed down from the truck.

As she bent to speak to a small girl of about five or six who was standing and pointing at the bandanna at her neck, she couldn't resist picking the child up into her arms. She was gaily tying the kerchief around the child's neck when she caught a glimpse of Marcus watching her. For a moment their eyes met. Amy stood with the child in her arms smiling softly. Even from a distance she could feel the power of his gaze searching deep into her private thoughts and feelings as if to see if they met with his approval. Then he turned to speak briefly with the old woman she had met earlier before he left with a group of men.

Amy gently set the child down when she saw that the old woman was
approaching her, evidently with a message from Marcus.

"Mr. Thorn says he'll meet you later. He has some business to discuss with the men first. Now, you follow me." The old woman waddled toward one of the sheds.

Once again Amy was disappointed that she had been left behind and Marcus hadn't included her in his business negotiations as planned. But she was so fascinated with these friendly people and the colorful displays of their culture that she spent the entire afternoon thinking only occasionally of Marcus.

By the end of the day Amy felt as if she fit into these people's lives as well as Marcus did. Every stop she made, she was rewarded with a gift of one of their precious crafts. She had received several colorful baskets, two beautiful flower pots, and her favorite—a beautiful necklace of turquoise stones, which she wore proudly around her neck. She was sitting around a large fire that hosted an iron tripod and cooking pots, trying her hand at mixing mush for fried corn spears when Marcus returned.

He, along with the other men, was ushered into the circle of women to eat a meal of cornbread and stewed beef. Shortly after the meal was over, several of the older women, headed by the old woman Amy had first met and now knew as Ishma, announced that they wished to see Amy and Marcus privately. Amy looked curiously at Marcus who nodded for them to follow the old woman. They walked in single file, first Ishma, then Marcus, Amy, and the other women of the tribe. The procession passed the last row of houses and turned the corner where a large teepee stood partially hidden by one of the houses. The old
woman paused at its entrance, waiting for Marcus and Amy to enter while the other women formed a circle around the dwelling. They were then told by Ishma this was to signify the circle of life before they entered the primitive structure.

Amy found it difficult to keep from admiring the oddities that decorated the surroundings. Crude colorful drawings of the sun, moon, and great warriors covered the walls of the teepee. Once again Amy found herself amused by the fierce-looking statues and masks of ancient Gods that stood along the back wall. But when she saw the seriousness of the old woman's manner, she felt rather embarrassed. Marcus moved closer to Amy as Ishma took her position at the center of the teepee and raised both arms upward after lighting two small torches secured by a mound of stones. Amy cast a side-glance at Marcus to discover his reaction to this strange ritual. But he seemed as serious about and as engulfed in the matter as Ishma.

Other than the old woman muttering some Indian phrases that Amy didn't understand, they were surrounded by a spiritual silence. That is, Amy imagined she felt the presence of something totally unknown to her, but the feeling gave her a sense of peace and happiness—yet she didn't know why. Her thoughts were quickly brought back to Ishma when she began speaking English.

"Upon the night of the changing moon, the spiritual God Tyreia betrothed a copper-haired maiden to a great chief." She pointed first to Amy then to Marcus, and paused. "May the dance of fertility begin." The sounds of shuffling feet and women singing softly about the teepee filled Amy's ears.
Amy's pulse raced wildly. What was the woman up to? She shifted her position restlessly and was steadied by Marcus's firm grip. She dared not look at him, for by the force he was placing on her upper arm, she knew he was taking this matter seriously.

"What the great Gods hath brought together to walk the earth as one, no man or spirit shall separate." Amy was being forced to kneel with Marcus before the burning torches.

"The maiden hath accepted the wreath of betrothal around her neck for all to see." Ishma placed her hands on Amy's head.

"My turquoise necklace? Good Lord, am I going through a wedding ritual?" she thought wildly.

Then Ishma sprinkled a pleasant herbal fragrance on them both as they rose. Upon the dull striking of a drum, Amy heard the women outside the teepee loudly chanting an Indian song.

Marcus seemed to know the next step of the ritual. He swooped Amy into his arms and carried her out of the teepee. Once outside, he gently deposited her before the growing crowd and waited for the old woman to appear. Expecting to see only the women, Amy was surprised to see all the members of the reservation crowding about them. As Ishma appeared with a large medallion with the symbol of the sun surrounded by turquoise stones, Marcus bent forward and allowed her to place it around his neck. Amy needed no explanation for the medallion. She had lived in Colorado long enough to know that the Indian's sun symbol meant power, and it was only worn by great chiefs. At this point she was so confused, all she could do was smile meekly when an old chief in full headdress stepped forward and bid them to
The crowd was an abundance of smiles and light conversation as they ushered Amy and Marcus back to the pickup trucks for their departure.

Amy said nothing but smiled politely during their ride back to the plane. She sighed with relief when all her gifts were placed safely in the sleeping quarters, and she was resting quietly in the cockpit. In fact, she had been so engulfed and confused with the strange ceremony that she hadn't noticed the darkening sky nor the faint sound of thunder settling behind the mountains as the trucks left for the reservation.

When Marcus finally entered the cockpit, Amy felt too shy to look at him. But he, seeing her nervous state, confronted her with the matter.

"You know, according to the Indians we're man and wife."

The words stabbed painfully at her chest. She couldn't take any more mockery from him. "That's ridiculous! You know these ancient customs don't hold up in a court of law," she hissed. "Besides, how dare you subject me to such a situation when all I came here for was a business negotiation!" Her temper was controlling her words. "As far as I'm concerned, you've humiliated me for the last time." As much as she loved him, she just couldn't stand her feelings being played with any longer.

"Is that the only thing you felt while we were on the reservation, humiliation?" he growled.

"What else? I hardly call being forced to stand in front of a
crazy old woman who thinks she's some kind of ... witch doctor, entertaining." She was sorry she had said the last remark before she finished the last syllable, for she hadn't meant it. After all, Ishma had been good to her, despite her strange customs.

But it was too late for her to retract her words. A veil of anger hardened Marcus's features. She thought he was going to strike her, and she gasped loudly when he violently reached for her throat and snatched the necklace from her neck, scattering the turquoise stones freely on the cockpit floor.

"You're not worthy of wearing anything so sacred to the Indians," he raged.

"I didn't ..." She tried to explain, tears now flowing freely down her pale cheeks.

"You know, you're no different from the other women I've known. You're only out for what you can get."

"It's not like that at all ..."

"No? Your lies disgust me! Oh, I'll admit you had me fooled with your sweet pretense of loving the ranchlife, and you did a pretty darn good job today of charming the women and children into believing you are something you aren't. But I guess you'd do anything to keep that ranch, wouldn't you—no matter who you had to hurt along the way."

"Stop it! That's not true," she shrieked.

But Marcus's sharp words cut through her last remark. "I won't have you putting down those people on the reservation. They have more than you'll ever hope to have—compassion, understanding, and a way of belonging to this land. Why don't you grow up, little girl, and
go back to New York and those cut-throat executives where you do belong?" He turned sharply to switch on the engine ignition.

"Because I love you," she whimpered, but it was impossible for Marcus to have heard her over the roaring of the plane's engine.

The plane lurched forward, barely giving her time enough to fasten herself in her seat. She noticed that Marcus hadn't even requested ground clearance, much less taken the time to buckle his own seatbelt. She was hurting so badly inside that she felt numbed by his stinging words. She hadn't meant what she'd said. She only wanted to hurt him because of the pain she'd suffered during the wedding ritual. She wanted to marry him more than she wanted to live, but she knew he was only playing along with the game out of respect for the Indian custom rather than caring for her. Now she had destroyed what little hope she'd had for their happiness. Perhaps Marcus was right. She really didn't belong here. As far as he was concerned, her heritage was branded deep into her like that of a young calf's.

Outside her window Amy could see the reflection of the plane's running lights on the tip of the wing. And she noticed that the sky was much darker than was normal for dusk. She turned her gaze to Marcus who was concentrating on their flight course. Still she could see the hatred for her set deep in the stern lines of his jaw and the glassy reflection of his eyes. When she turned her face to view out the window, a chill clenched her body as she saw mountains of black storm clouds slowly swallowing the plane. Sharp bolts of lightning scratched through the air like jagged pieces of broken glass. A sudden torrent of rain rocked the small plane without mercy. Amy
gasped, turning to see Marcus trying to fasten his seatbelt while fighting with the control wheel. Without thinking, Amy released her own seatbelt and grabbed the dangling shoulder strap, securing it to the belt around his waist. A strong current of turbulence nearly jolted her out of her seat. She reached for her own shoulder harness and barely had the latch set when the plane tilted nose forward.

At each nerve-racking jolt of the plane, Amy, despite her trust in Marcus's competency, fought the tremors of fear shaking her body. She held her breath as Marcus cut the plane upward; she knew he was trying to get above the storm. As her head pushed hard against the seat, she cast a worried glance at Marcus. Though small drops of perspiration beaded across his forehead, she was convinced he had nerves of steel.

A sudden downdraft pulled the plane into the darkness of the heavy clouds, a darkness scarred only by the bright streaks of fiery lightning. The plane was being tossed about in the cross-currents like a child's ball.

"I'm going to have to try and take her down. She can't stand much more of this pressure." Amy barely heard Marcus's voice between the clashes of the booming thunder. "Get your head down!"

Another lurch of the plane caused Amy momentarily to freeze with panic. She sat frozen-stiff in her seat as a torch of lightning ripped at the right wing.

"I said, 'Get your head down!'" Strong hands shoved her head to her knees as the plane was sucked downward again by a severe draft.
The nausea caused by the sudden drop in altitude kept her from raising it again.

"Hang on, I'm gonna set her down ..." Marcus's last statement faded as the screech of rubber against rock drowned his words. The nose of the plane rose slightly upward; its belly bounced and thudded for quite a distance before the plane came to a sudden halt. From this point on Amy lost track of time. She thought she felt the latch on her seatbelt snap open but wasn't sure, for her head struck something padded—yet hard, and she fell into a state of faintness.

Amy felt a stabbing sensation of pain as black shadows fluttered before her eyes. She remained semiconscious, totally separated from reality by the booming and clashing world about her. The roaring of the rain pounding against the metal of the plane deafened her.

When the black veil began to recede and was replaced by gray shadows, Amy felt herself being lifted outside of the plane.

"Dear God, what have I done to you ..." She thought she felt the breath from Marcus's words gently part her hair above her right ear. But the stinging torrents of rain drenching her already trembling body, and the wind beating through her hair, added nothing but confusion to her throbbing head. Then she felt herself being lowered gently under a large object, probably a rock. And she was sure when her body was resting on the hard earth. "I'll be right back ... I've got to be sure it's safe ..." Marcus's soft voice teased her ears as she fainted.

Amy welcomed the warmth of blankets against her trembling naked
body. For a moment she thought she was lying in Marcus's arms telling him how much she loved him, and he was telling her the same.

"I'm so sorry ..." she thought she heard him say.

"I love you, Marcus," she returned. "Marcus!" Amy sat upright and was gently pulled back into strong arms that cuddled her head against what appeared to be a muscular shoulder. She struggled to force her eyes open, and the whirling objects around her began to take shape. She was back inside the plane, but she was disillusioned momentarily—something was missing. The storm. Everything was silent, except for what sounded like the rhythm of a heartbeat. She slowly raised her head and looked into Marcus's eyes. She was lying with him in the bed beside the cockpit.

It was a wonderful dream world. She was lying in Marcus's bed listening to him tell her how much he loved her over and over again.

"Don't leave me," she heard herself cry.

"Never, my darling," Marcus answered softly. "Go back to sleep."

Unable to fight the dizziness any longer, Amy obeyed. Besides, it was too beautiful of a dream to refuse the comfort that sleep could offer her.

During the night she felt herself being sheltered by warm arms. Once her dream turned into a nightmare. Marcus had left her and she was all alone in a raging storm. She heard herself call out his name but she was soon cradled in a comforting embrace until she wept herself back to sleep.

Amy woke to find herself cuddled safely in Marcus's arms. At first she was totally confused, but then the vague memories of a storm

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and a forced landing brought her slowly back to reality. "I've had the most wonderful dream," she muttered softly, still in a daze.

"It wasn't a dream." Marcus turned to face her and fondled a loose tendril of hair covering her bandaged forehead.

Shyly Amy touched a trembling finger to the bandage, and Marcus gently clasped his hand over hers. "It's only a bruise; don't be frightened."

"Did I sleep here ... with you ... all night?" Amy guessed at her nakedness as his bare leg brushed hers, and she blushed hotly.

"Don't worry, I haven't taken advantage of you, yet." He smiled impishly. "Our clothes were drenched in the storm, so I had no other choice than to let them dry." He pointed to both their clothes spread about the cabin floor. But for some reason this didn't bother her.

For one precious moment their eyes met—searching for the needed answers to so many questions that had been keeping them apart. Then Marcus revealed a side to Amy that she hadn't seen before—his breath labored as if he was having a difficult time finding the right words.

"Did you mean what you said last night?" he finally asked, searching her expression for the truth.

"I don't know ... that is, what exactly did I say?" she asked shyly.

"That you loved me." He paused.

There was a moment of silence, and tears swelled in Amy's eyes as Marcus gently lifted her chin, forcing her gaze to meet his. She knew she couldn't hide her feelings from him any longer. It just didn't
matter any more. He had told her yesterday that she had belonged in New York, and that was where she was going. So it was about time that he knew the truth, that she wasn't all the things he'd said she was. She was real, had compassion, and—most of all—she could love.

"Answer me, Amy." He forced her to look at him once more.

"Yes, I love you," she said sadly; the tears were out of control and were dripping onto the blanket that covered her.

"Damn it!" He stripped the covers from his naked body and reached for his jeans, stretched out on the floor to dry.

Shyly she turned away until she was sure he was dressed. When she looked up again, Marcus was standing over her angrily running his fingers through his rumpled hair.

"Good Heavens, woman, why didn't you say something earlier? Do you know what hell I've gone through to keep from making a damned fool of myself every time I'm near you?"

"I don't understand ..."

"You darling child, can't you see I've been half out of my head in love with you? I've plotted in every way possible just to get you near me. I thought if I could see you occasionally the infatuation would wear off. But it didn't. Instead, it grew into something I couldn't control and I wanted to crush you every time you crossed me for what you were doing to me."

"And you almost did a few times." This time it was tears of joy that blinded her vision.

"I know, and I'm so sorry. Last night when we were grounded and you were knocked unconscious I blamed myself, cursed myself, and I
promised God if he gave you back to me, I'd take care of you forever."

"Why, Marcus Thorn, had you forgotten your already promised responsibilities?" Amy smiled broadly.

"And what were those?" he asked, kneeling beside her.

"According to Indian law I was already one of your responsibilities. We shall walk the earth as one and no spirit or man can separate us," she said sweetly.

"You actually remembered those vows?" His hand gently caressed her tear-stained cheek.

"Of course, do you think I'd take my own wedding less seriously?"

"But I thought ..." Amy placed her fingertips to his lips for she knew what he was going to say. "Now it's your turn to listen to me; you said your piece yesterday. The only reason I was so angry yesterday was because I didn't think you were serious about the matter, and the very idea of going through that wedding ceremony, knowing that I could never really have you, nearly cut my heart out. I tried to tell you how I felt several times, but every time I thought of Jacqueline I didn't think there was any use."

"Oh, what have I done to you? I'm so sorry." He gathered her into his arms and held her for what seemed to Amy an eternity. "You're the only woman I've every truly loved, and in my heart you are mine." He pushed her slightly away from him. "But would you mind having another small wedding when we get back home--just to make it ... 'legal' was the word I think you used earlier."

"Marcus, I'd marry you a hundred times if that's what it took for us to be together," she whispered, throwing her arms around his neck
as her lips searched for his.

Hungriily his mouth met hers. He pulled her closer to his firm body so that she might know how desperately he wanted and loved her. His hands roamed possessively over her, fighting the folds of the blanket covering her naked body. Then they pulled reluctantly from their embrace. "Not like this, I want our honeymoon to be perfect—not in the back of a plane. Here, get dressed before I change my mind." He kissed her lightly and gave her her clothes.

Amy dressed quickly and joined Marcus in the cockpit. "Was there any damage to the plane?" she asked.

"Only a small fuel leak, and I repaired that last night before I brought you back inside."

"So it wasn't all a dream," she muttered, remembering being carried out of the plane among other things.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." She sighed and allowed Marcus to fasten her seatbelt.

"You better not plan on keeping secrets from me, Mrs. Thorn."

He grinned broadly and took his seat in the pilot's chair.

Mrs. Thorn. Well, the name surely was a miracle sent straight to her from heaven. She sighed once more and lay back in the soft seat.

As the engines roared to life and the plane climbed slowly to the heart of the deep blue sky, Amy looked over at Marcus and her heart
swelled with pride at the realization she had finally won the battle.

When the plane levelled off and they were drifting over the Colorado mountains, Marcus gently laid his hand on hers, and, as she closed her eyes in total happiness, she felt something cool being slipped around her neck. When she opened her eyes, she looked down at the turquoise necklace that Marcus had evidently restrung some time during the night.

As her heart leaped with joy, and her eyes briefly met Marcus's, she remembered the final words to the little quotation that her Uncle Jake used to say to her when she was a child, "Pride Before Defeat" ...